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'Men, we just deal with it differently': researching sensitive issues with young men

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Introduction

This article discusses the sensitivities that come into play when researching issues of gender identity and relationships with young men, particularly when the researcher is male. The article argues that the nature of hegemonic masculinity, and the way that masculinity 'works' in the research process, means that research with young men on these issues is inherently sensitive and brings with it considerable challenges for researchers. Adopting a psychosocial approach to issues of gender identity, and to conceptualising the research process, the article also argues that it is important to understand the research encounter as an intersubjective process in which the identities of both researcher and researched influence each other in dynamic though often hidden ways. The article discusses these challenges in detail and suggests ways in which researchers might respond to them.

The research studies

This paper draws on the author's experiences of researching men and masculinity across two decades, which have included studies of men working in early years childcare (Robb, 2001) and fathers involved in the care of their young children (Robb, 2004a, 2004b). However, the article will draw principally on two more recent studies with socially disadvantaged young men, undertaken between 2013 and 2017. In the first, I acted as Principal Investigator for the ESRC-funded study (Grant No. ES/K005863) 'Beyond male role models: gender identities and practices in work with young men', a collaboration between The Open University and the UK charity Action for Children]. This study explored the role of gender in work with young men using social care services and involved interviews with service users and support staff at centres in Scotland, Wales and England (Featherstone *et al*, 2017; Robb *et al*, 2017b; Ruxton *et al*, 2017; Ward *et al*, 2017). In the second, I was Principal Investigator for 'Young men, masculinity and wellbeing', part of a three-country study in the UK, USA and Mexico, led by the US gender equality organisation Promundo and funded by Axe/Unilever, exploring the links between social expectations surrounding masculinity and young men's emotional wellbeing. The UK strand of the study consisted of focus groups with young men from diverse social, ethnic and religious backgrounds in London and Yorkshire (Robb and Ruxton, 2018; Robb *et al*, 2017; Heilman, Barker and Harrison, 2017).

A psychosocial perspective on research with men

This article takes a psychosocial approach to understanding the research process, and to the study of gender identities. Drawing on the principles of

psychoanalysis but refracted through a social lens, psychosocial research studies the ways in which subjective experience is interwoven with social life, maintaining that subjective experiences 'cannot be abstracted from societal, cultural and historical contexts, but nor can they be deterministically reduced to the social'. Instead, social and cultural worlds are 'shaped by psychological process and intersubjective relations' (Association for Psychosocial Studies, undated). As Stephen Frosh has argued, a purely sociological approach to personal experience risks 'flattening' out emotional life and reducing it to the interplay of social forces (Frosh, 2002, p.189).

This approach assumes that research data are produced dynamically in the interactions between researcher and researched. On the one hand, it acknowledges that this is a socially constructed process, in which the social identities of those involved and the wider social context will, to a greater or lesser extent, influence the data that is produced. However, a psychosocial perspective maintains that the research process is also influenced by unconscious and intersubjective factors. According to Hollway and Jefferson, common to all psychoanalytic schools is 'the idea of a dynamic unconscious which defends against anxiety and significantly influences people's actions, lives and relations' (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, p.19). More specifically, the same authors argue, a psychosocial approach construes 'both the researcher and researched as anxious defended subjects, whose mental boundaries are porous where unconscious material is concerned.' They continue:

'This means that both will be subject to projections and introjections of ideas and feelings coming from the other person. It also means that the impressions that we have about each other are not derived simply from the 'real' relationship, but that what we say and do in the interaction will be mediated by internal fantasies which derive from our histories of significant relationships' (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, p.45).

Much writing about the research process focuses on the impact of the process on participants, paying less attention to the impact on the researcher. However, a psychosocial approach cannot overlook the fact that the researcher is also a person with a constantly evolving identity, which includes their gender identity, and with unconscious motivations that inevitably come into play in the research encounter. While there is a substantial literature on the impact of researcher identity, including his or her gender or ethnic identity (for example, see Gough, 2003; Gunaratnam, 2003; Arendell, 1997), analysis tends to focus on one direction of influence, being interested primarily in the impact of the researcher's identity on participants. However in this article I want to suggest that the influence is two-way, and that researcher and researched are bound together in a dynamic loop of intersubjective influence. There is a need to encourage a critical reflexivity on the part of researchers about how their own identities and interactions both shape and are shaped by the research encounter. This is particularly the case when the topic being researched is of a sensitive nature, such as research focusing on issues of gender identity, since it may generate sensitivities for researchers as well as for participants.

The identities that come into play in the research process, and dynamically influence it, include the gender identities of both researchers and participants. A psychosocial approach to gender shares, with writers from a sociological perspective such as Connell (1995), the notion that masculinities and femininities are plural, socially situated and constantly formed and reformed in social interactions, rather than being static or biologically predetermined. However, a psychosocial perspective also includes a keen awareness that, to quote Redman (2005, p. 535), 'the various practices through which boys and young men "do" masculinity are saturated with unconscious fantasy, intersubjective communication, and inextricably blurred boundaries between self and other.' Elsewhere, Redman and colleagues argue that 'psychoanalytic arguments can help us get to grips with the emotional labour involved in [everyday] activities, since they necessarily focus on the endless business by which unconscious anxieties and desires enter into and inflect our experience of the social world' (Redman *et al*, 2002, p.183).

One of the specific contributions that a psychosocial approach can make to understanding the way masculinity 'works' in sensitive research with men and boys, derives from the work of psychoanalytic feminist writers, such as Jessica Benjamin (1988; 1998), who argue that masculinity, particularly in the contemporary western context, is a defensive structure achieved via distancing from the feminine and a 'repudiation of femininity' (Benjamin, 1998, p.136). In a similar way, Nancy Chodorow (1978) describes masculinity as a defensive and compensatory construction based on negation of the mother. Redman (2005, p. 535) argues that the prevalence in some 'school-based cultures of masculinity of homophobia, misogyny, racism, physical violence and the disparagement of that which is perceived to be 'effeminate', suggest profound levels of unconscious anxiety and confusion and, in consequence, a desperate attempt to split off and locate inside others that which feels too painful to tolerate.' This defensiveness may be particularly evident when an individual's masculinity is felt to be under threat: for example, in a research interview or focus group when sensitive issues relating to gender identity and relationships are being explored. Male participants may respond to the invitation to explore such sensitive areas by employing a range of defensive strategies, including avoiding directly answers to questions, or diverting the conversation on to less threatening topics.

A psychosocial view shares with more sociological accounts of gender construction a view that gender identities, including masculinities, are constantly in process and need to be continuously 'performed' (Butler, 1990). Given the defended nature of masculine identity, this sense of performance will be intensified in the presence of other men, for example in an all-male focus group, or where the researcher is himself male, with an inevitable impact on the way that male participants respond to questions perceived to be of a 'sensitive' nature. This article will suggest that a psychosocial perspective not only deepens understanding of researching sensitive subjects with men, but can also help to provide strategies for dealing with some of the challenging issues that arise from that process.

'Bottle it up and get on with it': young men talking about emotions

One of the ways in which the masculine identities of participants can shape research with young men on sensitive issues, such as gender and relationships, is the social expectation that men and boys will be unwilling, and to some extent unable, to share their feelings openly in a public setting. Research on the sociology of the emotions, and work on emotional labour, has analysed the gendered social construction of emotional life (Hochschild, 1983). It could be argued that 'common sense' assumptions about gender differences of this kind have been given academic credibility by the work of researchers such as Carol Gilligan (1982), who, responding to arguments that women are somehow deficient in moral reasoning, argued that women and men have different 'moral voices', with the former focused on relationships and care and the latter more concerned with questions of rights and justice. Out of the work of Gilligan and other 'difference feminists' has grown the burgeoning field of feminist care ethics (Held, 2005; Kittay, 1999). At the same time, and from a very different perspective, developments in neuroscience have lent credence to conventional assumptions that women 'are better able to connect feelings to words and use language to express interior experiences and memories' which 'helps them to communicate verbally with others, which builds relationships' (Bottaro, 2018). These ideas have been popularised in bestselling books such as John Gray's *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (1992), though critics such as Deborah Cameron (2007) and Cordelia Fine (2017) have argued convincingly that the science behind them is flawed.

It might be countered that, even if differences in emotional expressivity have traditionally existed between men and women, they have largely been eroded, as notions of what constitutes acceptable masculinity have changed, and as younger generations of men grow up with different masculine gender norms, including greater encouragement to share their feelings (for example, see Anderson, 2009; McCormack, 2012; McCormack and Anderson, 2010). More men are now involved in the direct care of their children (Doucet, 2006; Dermott, 2008), more fluid ideas of gender identity have come to the fore, and the image of the ideal man as 'buttoned up' and inexpressive has been supplemented in popular culture by alternative images of men as caring, expressive individuals (Robb, 2020).

However, one of the persistent findings from research with boys and young men, including research undertaken by the present author, is that many still find the articulation of feelings difficult, and that this difficulty is in part the result of persistent expectations about how 'real' men should behave, especially in the presence of other men (Robb and Ruxton, 2017). Researchers on young masculinity have consistently reported a lack of emotional openness in the groups they encountered. Holland and colleagues described the 'unsupportive' nature of talk in boys' peer groups, with their 'collective pressure to express and define themselves in a particular way in order to prove their manhood' (Holland *et al.*, 1998, pp. 12–13; see also Mac an Ghaill, 1994). On the other hand, while Frosh and colleagues found the boys they interviewed for their study reluctant to

talk openly about personal issues in group settings, they were more prepared to do so in one-to-one encounters (Frosh *et al.*, 2002). Thus young men's lack of confidence in sharing their feelings about sensitive issues in the research encounter may be partly contextual, and therefore dependent on creating an environment in which there is less need to 'perform' masculinity in front of peers. At the same time, it should be remembered that masculine identities are diverse and, at least in part, socially constructed, so that the identities of young men from different social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds will shaped by varying social expectations around gender. Particular issues will be more or less 'sensitive' for different groups of young men, depending to some extent on their background and experience.

The stereotype of the inexpressive young male certainly found some support in our second research study with young men, from a range of social, ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Robb, Ruxton, and Bartlett, 2017). When it came to dealing with emotional problems, some participants in this study said that they would find specifically 'masculine' ways of dealing with them, rather than sharing their feelings with others or seeking professional help. As one participant said: 'Men, we just deal with it differently…we've got other channels for expressing our feelings'. Some suggested that if they were experiencing problems they would simply 'Bottle it up and get on with it' or 'work it out', perhaps by going to the gym, or 'just put the kettle on'. One member of a group of young men in their teens said: 'We can get a laugh out of serious things if it comes to it. Always turn it into a bit of a joke'. While it would be easy to dismiss this kind of masculine talk as a way of evading emotional engagement, recent research on men's 'banter' has suggested that it can be viewed more positively as a creative way of dealing with difficult feelings (Nichols, 2018).

Humour was certainly one of the ways in which this reluctance to talk openly about emotional issues manifested itself. Other strategies included giving brief or superficial responses, or simply avoiding the question and passing on to other issues. This was the case in our attempts in this study to raise the issue of sexuality and particularly of same-sex relationships. However, perhaps the most significant strategies for not engaging with sensitive emotional issues in evidence in our studies involved avoidance of or diversion away from these issues, strategies which can be seen as confirming what was said earlier about the defended nature of masculine identities.

'It's weakness…it's an excuse': defensive masculinities on display in the discussion of sensitive issues

Anderson (2005) suggests that defensive masculinity is particularly evident in contexts where masculine identity is threatened, including what are perceived to be 'feminised terrains'. It can be argued that a research study on sensitive issues such as gender identity and relationships would certainly be perceived by some young men as a 'feminised' setting. This is because, despite the changes in gender relations described earlier, there continue to be very few social spaces in which

it is legitimate for men to openly discuss issues of this kind with each other (Robb, 2004a).

This masculine defensiveness can have an impact on the research process in a number of ways. In a focus group with black and ethnic minority young men in south London, which formed part of our second study, one participant consistently deflected any discussion of his own feelings about relationships by directing blame towards young women:

The government gives all the benefits to the female, all the parental responsibilities to the female. Like at the end of the day, yeah, I've seen it happen so many times, it's becoming annoying. If I see another single mum walking down the street, yeah, I'm going to explode in my mind….It's gone from men being sexist to men having all the power to now really and truly women have got all the power.

It was clear that this young man had been through some painful experiences in his intimate relationships, but all of his emotional energy was directed outwards, towards women and girls. In attempting to understand reactions of this kind, it is important to see them in the context of the anti-feminist backlash and rise of men's rights movements in recent years. Young men will have been exposed to these insurgents discourses, as well as to 'official' discourses of gender equality (Flood, 2004). Other defensive strategies may include attempts to deny that a problem exists, or in discussing a painful issue to direct attention away from the personal to the societal level. In the same group discussion with young men in south London, this dynamic was evident in the forceful refusal by some participants to allow that men might experience real problems with depression, with the implication that to admit to this would be 'weak' and unmanly:

P1: If anyone who says they have depression, for me, I think there's weakness in

them.

P2: Exactly.

Interviewer: You think it's weakness?

P1: Yeah, yeah it's weak, it's an excuse.

Interviewer: Right, why do you think that?

P1: Because…

P2: It's an excuse.

P1: Well I was going to say, obviously from my background, my parents are from Nigeria, so I know people who struggle – you get what I'm saying to you?

Interviewer: Sure, sure, right.

P1: So when I heard some guy say, 'Oh yeah gonna get me a breakdown', I felt like giving him a breakdown in his face.

Despite this attempt to shut down the discussion, a third participant eventually managed to give voice to his own experience of mental health problems. However, he did this in in a way that could itself be seen as defensive and evasive:

P3: Yeah, but what you've got to remember is that a lot of teachers, not the teachers, a lot of doctors, like once they find out that that kid's bad, they'll just slap it on him, 'Oh, he's got ADHD' [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder] … They slap it on him, oh he's got ADHD, oh he's got autism. Like from when I've grown up, yeah, my family has a history of mental illness ranging from my nan to her mum, and every boy in the family has something wrong with them, put it like that.

Interviewer: Every boy in the family?

P3: Yeah, every boy in the family, but the girls are calm. I don't know how that works, but that's just how it goes. But at the same time, when I was younger they diagnosed me like with ADHD and autism when I was five. I've been to like five different schools. … But as you get older it's like raw. It's still there, but it's not, you know how to control it more, if you know what I mean. But nowadays it's just like everyone's just getting slapped with it. Oh he's a bad - you, ADHD, he's a bad - you, ADHD.

In this example, we see a young man who had obviously experienced significant mental health problems couch that admission within a general complaint about how boys are labelled with mental health conditions, which to some extent undermined and diverted attention away from what he is saying about his own suffering. Within the hostile context established by the other participants in the group, perhaps that is the closest it was possible for him to come to an admission of something as unmasculine as emotional pain.

A psychosocial approach to research tends to support the use of an open-ended, narrative method for exploring sensitive issues with participants. For example, Hollway and Jefferson's 'free association narrative interview' technique advocates allowing participants' ideas and views emerge as far as possible in their own words and following participants' own 'ordering and phrasing' of their story (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, p. 53). However, in the focus group examples cited here, this approach actually allowed participants to avoid open discussion of sensitive issues, such as mental health and intimate relationships, and at the same time to obstruct other participants' emotional honesty. On reflection, a more interventionist approach by the interviewer, challenging these avoidance tactics, might have resulted in a more productive exchange. The strengths and weaknesses of narrative methods for researching sensitive issues will be discussed in more detail below.

Being a man: the experience of a male researcher

So far, the discussion has focused on the way that the gender identity of *participants* might influence the way that sensitive topics are discussed in

research with young men. However, as stated earlier, the research encounter is a two-way, intersubjective process, in which the identity of the *researcher* also plays a part. This is particularly the case when the researcher is male, due to the performative character of masculinity, especially in all-male settings. Since gender identities are not simply inherent in the individual, but continually produced in interactions and relationships, it is important to take into account the impact of the researcher's identity on the process.

From a psychosocial perspective, the discussion of sensitive issues will inevitably have an impact on the researcher as well as those he is researching. Given that the male researcher has a masculine identity of his own, this means that the discussion of topics that are sensitive for men will have an impact on his sense of himself as a man, engaging and entangling him emotionally. In turn, this will have an impact on his own behaviour as a researcher. But it should also be borne in mind that the researcher will himself be 'performing' masculinity, and the ways in which he does this, like the participants' performance, will be partly dependent on how he, at both a conscious and unconscious level, positions the 'other', the participant.

At the same time, participants' performance of masculinity in the research encounter will to some extent be *in response to* the researcher: the participants will be performing 'to' the researcher. Therefore the ways in which the participant perceives and positions the researcher's gender identity will inevitably have an impact on their own performance of masculinity. Elsewhere I have argued that this is made up of a complex web of identifications and disidentifications, most of them hidden from view (Robb, 2004a).

It is also important to add that these issues cannot be considered in isolation from other social identities, such as social class, ethnicity and age. For example, in our focus group study, we were keenly aware as researchers of our identities as older, white male academics, facilitating focus groups with much younger, ethnically diverse and mostly socially disadvantaged men. The ways in which participants positioned us, reflected in the questions they asked about our own backgrounds (for example, whether we were married or were fathers ourselves) arguably had an impact on the ways in which they performed their masculinity, and how they responded to our questions on sensitive topics.

These researcher-participant relationships inevitably have an unconscious component that evokes associations with previous and particularly with family relationships. For example, a younger man might possibly see in an older male researcher traces of his own father, or of other paternal or authority figures in his life, and position the researcher accordingly. There will then be identifications and disidentifications based on these positionings and the ways in which these play out are not necessarily predictable or easy to disentangle (Robb, 2004a). As argued below, there is a need for researchers both to reflect critically on these processes, as part of their analysis, and to enlist the support of others to enable them to do so.

Identifications can arise from an unconscious desire to be like, or be liked by, the other party. This can be true for the researcher as much as the person being researched, and can lead to either the researcher or the participant playing up or playing down certain aspects of their identity, or framing their questions or responses in a way designed to please or gain affirmation and approval from the other party. After all, being 'liked' by participants can be conducive to the production of useful data. Disidentifications can arise from a sense of unlikeness and not wanting to be like the other and can lead to defensiveness or hostility, and a desire to emphasise differences from the other person. As a consequence, in exploring a sensitive issue such as gender identity, a participant may opt, either consciously or unconsciously, to emphasise ways in which his identity and experience do, or alternatively do not align with those of the researcher.

Of course, to some extent what is being described here is common to all research encounters, and indeed to all human interaction. In the case of research, some of this may be conscious or strategic: a researcher may consciously decide to 'play up' similarities in order to gain the trust and engagement of the research participant. But I would argue that particular issues of identification and its opposite arise when both researcher and researched are male. Something about the performative, defensive nature of masculinity means that gender identity will always be 'in play' in the encounter, influencing it in particular ways. When the focus of the discussion is a sensitive issue such as gender identity itself, then this performativity and defensiveness are arguably heightened. And finally, a psychosocial approach maintains that, whether or not this is part of the researcher's conscious strategy, at an unconscious level these processes are going on anyway. Once again, a critically reflexive awareness of the impact of these factors needs to be a part of data analysis when researching sensitive issues with young men.

In terms of my own personal experience as a researcher, I am reflexively aware that I come to this activity as an older, white man, originally from a working-class/lower middle-class background, but as one who has inevitably taken on a middle-class identity as a result of education and career. I also come to the research as someone who does not identify with many aspects of 'traditional' masculinity: indeed, this has been one of the motivations for my interest in this field of research. Admittedly, all researchers put on something of an act when interviewing: research itself can be seen at least in part as a performance. We choose, either consciously or unconsciously, to bring into play some aspects of our 'self' and not others, or to emphasise some aspects and downplay others.

For myself, I am aware that when interviewing participants from disadvantaged backgrounds, my submerged working-class identity, to which I no longer have any real claim, can come to the surface, as I seek connection with participants. I suspect that there are elements of class guilt here, or of wishing to recover, if only temporarily, aspects of my identity that I have suppressed in other areas of my life. This capacity to draw on different aspects of the self is the result of many years of experience, not only as a researcher but prior to that as a practitioner working with marginalised communities. As a result, these practices have become embedded in my performance as a researcher, and therefore difficult to

view objectively. One possible danger of this unconscious need to find points of identification with research participants might be the risk of colluding with participants' attitudes, including their strategies for avoiding or diverting from open discussion of sensitive topics. Moreover, as a consequence of seeking to identify with participants, there is a risk of highlighting similarities and overlooking important differences. There is a need for researchers to be reflexively aware of how their own identities and identifications might influence the research process, both in terms of data collection and data analysis.

Are young men more likely to 'open up' about sensitive issues with a male rather than a female researcher? This is a longstanding debate (see for example, Williams *et al*, 1993; Arendell, 1997). In our experience of the two studies cited in this article, the fact that young men were willing to engage in discussion of these issues at all was a sign of trust that was partly based on a shared gender identity. At the same time, given our earlier discussion of how masculinity operates in all-male settings, it should be remembered that our participants' responses were motivated and shaped, in part, by a need to 'perform' or bolster their masculine identities in front of each other, and in front of us as male researchers.

Methods and approaches

If these are some of the issues that arise when researching sensitive issues of identity and relationships with young men, what can researchers, and particularly male researchers, do to mitigate some of the impact and to ensure that the research encounter is productive, and how can a psychosocial perspective help to frame appropriate strategies? One suggestion is that an open-ended, narrative approach will be more productive in overcoming reluctance and defensiveness in participants, than one based on an interview schedule packed with pre-determined questions. In my own experience, closed and direct questions about sensitive issues are rarely productive, and may lead to brief and less than illuminating responses. There is also the fact that the language of gender identity, and therefore the way in which questions are framed, may be alien to the discourse of participants. My personal experience as a researcher is that asking men and boys direct questions about their 'masculinity' or 'gender identity' is mostly unproductive (see Robb, 2004a). Instead, the aim should be to encourage participants to talk openly about their lives and their experiences, with the hope that their perceptions about the issues under review will emerge less directly.

Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) free association narrative interview method, influenced by insights from psychoanalysis, that was referred to earlier, involves asking a single generative or catalytic question, and then following as far as possible the participants' own frame of reference. However, as noted above, the question arises as to what happens if, given the defended nature of masculine gender identities, participants avoid the 'sensitive' issues that you would really like them to discuss? Preferable to complete open-endedness might be a semi-structured narrative method in which the interviewer or facilitator skilfully and sensitively turns the flow of the conversation, from time to time, back to these

topics, in a way that is close to the 'art' of the therapist or counsellor, and also challenges or gently disrupts attempts to avoid the topic, or to 'shut down' the contributions of others.

At the same time, one consequence of the issues discussed in this article might be that individual interviews will be more productive than focus groups in encouraging young men to be open about sensitive issues, since they remove at least one source of peer pressure. As suggested in the study by Frosh and colleagues (2002) cited earlier, a combination of focus groups, which initiate discussion of sensitive issues at a general level, followed by individual interviews, in which participants , having become comfortable with the topic, are enabled to be more open in a more supportive environment, might be an effective solution.

Given what has been said about gender dynamics, it is also important to give careful thought to the composition of research teams, and where there is scope for involving more than one researcher, to consider deploying mixed-gender teams, or repeat interviews alternating male and female researchers, in order to elicit potentially different responses. In any case, there is great value in recruiting a mixed gender team at the analysis stage, so as to compare and highlight gender differences in response to the data.

 At the same time, and whatever the gender composition of the research team, it is important to build in time and resource for extended critical reflection on the research encounter. This will involve the researcher making detailed personal notes after each interview or focus group, followed by supervision or peer review sessions, in which the researcher is enabled to reflect critically on the interpersonal dynamics experienced in the encounter, and how this might have had an impact on the data.

Conclusion

This article has sought to explore some of the complex issues that arise when researching sensitive issues of gender identity and relationships with young men, particularly when the researcher is also male. Based on critical reflections on the author's own experience as a researcher, the article has highlighted some of the issues that arise from viewing the research encounter as a psychosocial process in which the identities and interactions of researchers and participants influence the outcome of the encounter. The article has argued that, because of the nature of masculine identities and the ways that masculinity 'works' in the research encounter, young men are likely to adopt strategies to avoid engaging with sensitive issues, and to actively divert from and defend against the open sharing of feelings and experiences. Finally, drawing on psychosocial insights, the article has suggested some ways in which research teams can mitigate the negative consequences of these factors, and ensure that the research process is productive.

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