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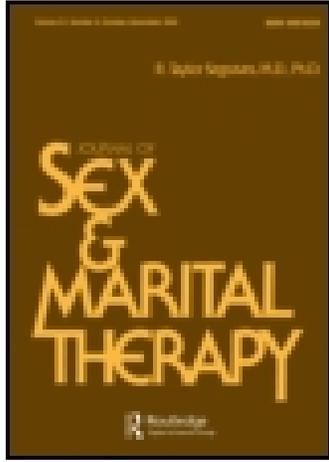
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### Defining infidelity in research and couple counseling: A qualitative study

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**Defining infidelity in research and couple counseling: A qualitative study**

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## ABSTRACT

Infidelity can destroy relationships but there is longstanding debate in the field about how best to define the construct. A clear definition of infidelity is important theoretically, empirically and therapeutically, however research on the topic is limited. This study explores how seven experienced couple counselors define infidelity, based on their work with heterosexual couples presenting with this issue. Thematic Analysis was used to analyze interview transcripts and research findings suggest a rich web of conflicting definitions of infidelity for couple counselors and, in their accounts, clients. The findings support an understanding of infidelity as socially constructed and the implications of this for the field are discussed.

Key words: Couple counselling, infidelity, sexual infidelity, emotional infidelity  
qualitative research

There are a range of views about what exactly the term infidelity means (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a), to the extent that the definition of infidelity is said to have been “a topic of discussion in the scholarly literature for at least 20 years” (Hertlein & Weeks, 2007, p96). The variety of definitions that have been utilized in surveys and research studies has led to significant differences in the prevalence estimates for infidelity. Depending on the way infidelity is defined and the sample, research suggests that lifetime prevalence for infidelity is anywhere between 1.2% and 85.5% (Hertlein, Wetchler & Piercy, 2005; Luo, Cartun & Snider, 2010). A more conservative estimate based on nationally representative, random samples suggests lifetime prevalence for married partners engaging in extradyadic sexual intercourse of up to 25% (Blow & Hartnett, 2005b). These differences in the prevalence estimates demonstrate that although infidelity may be common, it is essential to consider how infidelity is defined by researchers and individuals. The definitions commonly used in infidelity research can be clustered in three broad categories: infidelity as sexual intercourse; infidelity as extra-dyadic sexual activities; and infidelity as emotional betrayal.

### *1. Infidelity defined as sexual intercourse*

Whilst the definition of infidelity in terms of sexual intercourse may be common, especially in large-sample research that estimates prevalence of infidelity (e.g., Whisman & Synder, 2007), it is not unproblematic. This definition may for example not be accepted by some couples who do not equate couple commitment with sexual fidelity, including swinging couples (de Visser & McDonald, 2007), polyamorous couples (Jamieson, 2004) and some male same-sex couples

(Heaphy, Donovan & Weeks, 2004). It is also problematic in that it assumes that sexual terms such as 'sexual intercourse' have one universally understood meaning. However, research indicates that the meaning attached to sexual terms depends on various factors including culture and context (Carpenter, 2001; Randall & Byers, 2003; Tawfik & Watkins, 2007). This underlines that defining infidelity in terms of sexual intercourse may not be very helpful for understanding what infidelity actually means to people.

### *2. Infidelity defined as extradyadic sexual activities*

Prevalence studies using the much broader definition of extradyadic sexual activities for infidelity unsurprisingly generate higher estimates of prevalence (Brand, Markey, Mills & Hodges, 2007). Research suggests that masturbation in the presence of another, oral sex, sexual play, kissing, flirting, visiting strip clubs, pornography use and having sexual fantasies about a person other than the partner may all be construed as infidelity (Bridges, Bergner & Hesson-McInnis, 2003; Randall & Byers, 2003; Whitty, 2003; Yarab & Allgeier, 1998; Yarab, Allgeier & Sensibaugh, 1999). Internet behaviors that have been defined as sexual infidelity include cybersex, exchanging sexual self-images, online dating, online flirting, and using online pornography (Henline, Lamke & Howard, 2007; Hertlein & Webster, 2008; Whitty, 2003). One conclusion that can be drawn from the research in this area is that there is a lot of individual difference in which behaviors are defined as infidelity; for couple counseling this suggests a wide field for potential conflict.

### *3. Infidelity defined as (emotional) betrayal*

The third commonly used definition of infidelity in the literature is in terms of an extradyadic emotional (non-sexual) bond. Emotional infidelity has been operationalised in various rather vague ways, including ‘deep emotional attachment’, ‘falling in love with another person’ (Buss et al., 1999), feeling ‘deeply connected’ (Sabini & Silver, 2005), an investment of romantic love, time and attention in a person other than the primary partner (Shackelford, LeBlanc & Drass, 2000), sharing intimate details, discussing complaints about the primary partner and meeting for an alcoholic drink (Henline et al., 2007; Luo et al., 2010). It has also been defined in the literature in terms of secrecy of the behavior on the one hand and experience of betrayal by one’s partner on the other (e.g. Hertlein & Piercy, 2008). However, defining infidelity in this way is problematic as, in theory, *any* behavior that is kept secret or evokes a sense of betrayal can be defined as infidelity. And an even broader definition of infidelity in terms of behaviors which break a couple’s contract and violate couple norms or contravene assumptions about relationship exclusivity can also be found in the literature (Hertlein, Wetchler & Piercy, 2005).

This overview of the definitional categories used in this research field highlights the lack of a consistent operational definition for infidelity (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a) and illustrates the problems and insufficiencies of all three definitions. It can be assumed that the apparent confusion around definitions is not only problematic for research and theory development, but also for therapeutic practice with couples in distress (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a). However, there is a surprising lack of research which has explored how practitioners and clients (rather than researchers) define infidelity. Further, much of the scant research on individuals’ perceptions of infidelity is overly reliant on hypothetical infidelity scenarios (e.g. Henline et al., 2007; Yarab,

Allgeier & Sensibaugh, 1999) and pre-set lists of behaviors rather than allowing respondents to define for themselves what constitutes infidelity. Of the five qualitative or mixed-method studies located, four focussed on online infidelity (Henline, Lamke & Howard, 2007; Hertlein & Piercy, 2008; Mileham, 2007; Whitty, 2005), two (Kitzinger & Powell, 1995; Whitty, 2005) used an unusual story-stem completion method, and only one (Mileham, 2007) asked respondents about their own experiences with infidelity. Only one study was located with a focus on infidelity in the context of couple counseling (Hertlein & Piercy, 2008) but this was a mixed method study with limited qualitative findings presented.

To explore how infidelity is defined by practitioners, and how they experience the ways their clients understand and define infidelity, the current explorative study focuses on couple counselors who have worked extensively with this presenting issue. In using qualitative interviews with seven experienced couple counselors, the study adds to the sparse literature that explores how individuals define infidelity and helps to clarify how definitional difficulties impact on therapeutic practice with infidelity.

## METHOD

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from both author's universities as well as from the counseling centre where the research was conducted and all participants provided informed consent.

## *Approach to analysis*

The analysis was predominantly focused at the semantic level, on the surface meanings of the data, without an attempt to look ‘under’ the data for underlying assumptions or what has been referred to as ‘ideologies’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In line with the focus on semantic analysis, the epistemological stance taken in this study was a form of tempered realism, in other words a broadly uncomplicated relationship between language and reality was assumed.

The type of analysis used for this study was Thematic Analysis (TA), a method which has been described as “foundational” and also both rich and flexible (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## *Researcher as instrument*

The assumption in this study was that any analysis of the study data was necessarily shaped by the authors’ subjectivities, such that the analysis entailed the authors’ interpretation of the counselors’ interpretations of their own and their clients’ experiences, what might be termed (borrowing from Smith & Osborn, 2008) a ‘triple hermeneutic’. This assumption meant that it was important for the authors to throughout the research reflect on their preconceptions of infidelity and reflect on the ways in which their personal histories and professional experience might impact their perception of the data. For transparency, the first author is a British woman and the second is a German man. Both are involved in long-term heterosexual and bi-cultural relationships. Both of us have both personal and professional (in terms of client work) experience of infidelity and how it impacts partners in a romantic relationship.

## *Participants*

The participants in this study were recruited from one Relate counseling centre in the South West of Britain; Relate is a nation-wide relationship counseling organization, the oldest and most well-established such organization in Britain. Participants were approached through the centre manager, with a focus on recruiting the most experienced couple counselors. There are typically about 30 counselors working for the centre at any one time; seven participants were recruited, five women and two men. All were White and British; their ages ranged from 27 to 56. They had been practicing as couple counselors for between 4.5 and 18 years; participants reported the bulk of their couple work was with heterosexual couples.

## *Source of data*

Data was collected through face-to-face interviews which were between 60 and 90 minutes long; interviews were selected as a flexible data collection method that allows the collection of rich narratives (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Study questions explored what participants perceived infidelity to be for themselves and their clients, their thoughts on why clients engage in infidelity and how clients respond to partner infidelity as well as how they worked with infidelity. All interviews were digitally recorded and 'orthographic' transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006) were produced.

## *Data Analysis*

The analysis followed the stages set out by Braun and Clarke (2006) and was iterative between the researchers, with researchers taking it in turn coding interviews, each reviewing, elaborating

and, with discussion, amending each other's work, until all seven interviews were coded. The links being made between individual participant statements and the higher level themes were then audited by the second author, who also reviewed the final write-up of the analysis. In this way, the quality and rigor of the analysis was considered and enforced in an ongoing manner in keeping with the guidelines for TA (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

## RESULTS

### *Infidelity as penetrative sex*

Many of those interviewed stated that for heterosexual clients the most common definition of infidelity was sex - "*penetrative sex*" [P5, 32] in particular - outside the committed relationship: "*If you took a hundred clients, most of them would say infidelity was actually sleeping with another*" [P4, 68-69]. Counselors commented that this definition was so pervasive that some clients would defend themselves against charges of infidelity on the grounds that "*nothing sexual took place*" [P3, 60].

In contrast to the view of clients commonly defining infidelity in terms of penetrative sex outside the relationship, there was the perception that this definition of infidelity was becoming seen as culturally outmoded, only relevant to, "*perhaps a 1950s, 60s traditional relationship*" [P1, 303]. The shifting of definitions may contribute to potential differences in infidelity definitions between couple partners presenting for marital counseling (P6, 44) and between counselors and clients: "*I think my definition of it, err how I'd define it and how clients do, will be two separate things (laughs)*" [P4, 23-24].

*Infidelity as sexual behaviors*

This analysis has used the term ‘coitus’ as a synonym for penetrative sex but it should be noted that the counselors themselves did not use this term; it is not in fact entirely clear how participants understood the phrase “penetrative sex,” but they often appeared to elide the distinction between coitus and other types of sexual behavior. In addition, it was clear from the analysis that participants did define infidelity in terms of a broader category of sexual behaviors. For example, a number of counselors stated that although looking with desire at another person was not infidelity, any kind of physical touch was (P4, 200; P1, 149-481]. This is an apparently simple definition; however, for one ‘swinging’ couple presenting with infidelity as an issue, it was not “*having sex*” [P4, 245] per se but breaking agreed rules about allowed types of touch [P4, 245-249] that was problematic. This demonstrates that at least for some couples in some specific contexts, although penetrative sex may not be defined as infidelity, other ‘milder’ forms of sexual contact may be.

If any type of touch was infidelity for some counselors and their clients, for others non-physical sexual contact was also infidelity. For example, so-called ‘sexting’, ranging from sending mobile phone text messages that were more or less flirtatious, to receiving mobile phone pictures of somebody’s genitals, was described as infidelity by some but not all counsellors. Counselor Four for example stated that although ‘sexting’ might lead to trust issues in a couple, that it was rare that clients would refer to this type of behavior in and of itself as “*an affair*” (P4, 84). One way of thinking about the different perspectives on non-physical sexual contact is in terms of a hierarchy of behavior with penetrative sex at the top and other ‘milder’ forms of

sexualized behavior at the bottom; in this schema the counselors and clients simply vary about where on the behavior continuum they see the infidelity cut-off (this behavior is infidelity, this behavior is not). Yet, the data suggested that both counselors and clients may in some contexts not see sexual behaviors as infidelity. For example, participants talked about how clients who have had sex outside the relationship may *deny* infidelity on the grounds that it was “*only a one night stand*” [P1, 421-422] and “*there was never any real relationship*” [P3, 88]. Another counselor made a similar distinction, stating that they did not see the actions of a sex addict, “*somebody who sleeps around because they need sex*” [P5, 70-71], as infidelity.

#### *Emotional infidelity*

While sexual infidelity was commonly discussed by the participants, they also talked about heterosexual couples who presented with infidelity concerns that were emotional rather than sexual. These included developing romantic feelings about or falling in love with someone else: “*I think the most difficult to come to terms with are when some, the other party’s fallen in love with someone else... it feels like the biggest betrayal*” [P5, 54-57]. The couple counselors also discussed how non-sexual and non-romantic relationships could prompt infidelity concerns: this type of relationship also “*evokes very powerful feelings and shakes the relationship up very badly*” [P7, 39-41], and can be “*perceived as being like an affair and is treated as an affair*” [P1, 174-177].

Non-sexual/non-romantic relationships may be perceived as threatening to the primary relationship because they have sexual and/or strong emotional components to them (e.g. warm feelings for a close friend), but such relationships may also be seen as problematic if they are

perceived to impinge on the primary relationship. Thus counselors often saw the perception of infidelity following from internet or mobile phone based communication as arising not from the behavior itself but from how much it was engaged in. For example, social networking sites were described as problematic for a couple, when one partner's usage began "*to encroach upon the closeness, the intimacy, the secure base of the relationship*" [P6, 49-50]. Another counselor saw texting as potentially problematic when the frequency of texting to non-sexual friends at work made the other partner "*envious*" [P1, 184]. This notion of infidelity as defined by quantity of a behavior rather than necessarily its quality is also implicit in another counselor's definition of infidelity in terms of "*paying too much attention to somebody else, or, or, or fantasizing for too long... [laughter]*" [P5, 210-211]. Another way of thinking about this is as infidelity as defined by whether the behavior detracts from the core relationship, even if the entire 'affair' is virtual or fantasy: "*It doesn't matter even if it's just in your head.*" [P5, 131]. This definition does not however make it easy to know when a friendship is or is not infidelity. One couple counselor for example pondered the difference between two people having an intimate dinner together and spending the same time period "in bed making love" and stated: "*I find it quite difficult to actually end my thoughts with a clear cut answer to why is it commonly seen as one is infidelity and no questions, no doubt, and the other isn't*" [P3, 71-79]. This begs the question about whether, for example, close women friends having intimate conversations are 'cheating' on their partners and how much closeness with a close friend is too much?

The notion of infidelity as defined in terms of impingement on the emotional bond of the primary couple was extended by some clients and counselors to include a very wide range of behavior: "*It could be a computer, it could be a, a wine...a car,*" anything that leads "*the other*

*to not feel like they're the most important thing*" [P4, 103-114]. Or, as one couple counselor put it, infidelity is *"where their partner is getting something external, stimulation whatever that is, whether that's a friendship, it's a web site or you know gambling or whatever, it's something happening outside the relationship"* [P1, 226-228]. What is important about this construction of infidelity is that it further stretches the definition, so it now includes behaviors where the 'other person' is in fact an object.

#### *Infidelity as secrets and betrayal*

While the participants defined infidelity in part in terms of the quantity of a behaviour they also defined it in terms of the quality and impact of a partner behavior. Thus Counselor Seven discussed the difference between having a sexual conversation over the internet with another person while sitting next to your partner, versus doing so secretly in the upstairs study while your partner watches television downstairs. As one counselor stated, infidelity involves the:

*establishment of an intimate, not necessarily physically intimate, relationship with another person that was quite clearly established on the basis of exclusion of the partner. In other words you can have such a friendship if it's a shared friendship but the moment it becomes a secret hidden friendship then that has become infidelity.* [P3, 79-85, emphasis in original].

In these terms, infidelity is defined by the extent to which is it about *"secrecy and deceit"* [P7, 150] and *"very calculated"* [P3, 304], that is, how the behavior is enacted in the relationship, rather than by the behavior itself. Yet the participants also talked about infidelity as being identified not only with secret acts by one party but also by the emotional response of the other

partner. Thus many participants suggested infidelity was defined by one partner's sense of "betrayal" [P5, P6] and the "breach of trust" [P1, P2]: "I think if, if your client uses the word, like I feel like so-and-so has betrayed me, you begin to look at it's probably been an affair of some sort" [P6, 39-42].

Defining infidelity in terms of the extent to which it has evoked a sense of betrayal is an 'eye of the beholder' definition, however such relativist construals of infidelity create problems for couple counselors who must negotiate between potentially different definitions in the couple, as in an example provided by Counsellor Three where one partner alleges infidelity on the basis of the way that their partner is looking at another person: "*the partner in those circumstances can feel positively ill treated and regarded with a mistrust that they feel is totally unfounded. ...For them it certainly doesn't come anywhere near behaving in an unfaithful way*" [3, 153-160].

Couple counsellors must also negotiate between partners' and their own definitions of infidelity. An example of this is when Counselor Five stated that some women may be threatened by their partner just looking at another women because their self-esteem is so low [5, 151-153]. This illustrates how a couple counselor's formulation of an allegation of infidelity, as arising from a self-image deficit, may be at odds with a client perception, that the allegation comes from legitimately concerning partner behavior. This is important because the couple counselor's reading of an infidelity allegation is likely to influence their therapeutic responses, here potentially by encouraging them to initiate exploration of the alleging partner's sense of self as desirable or worthwhile. This underlines that a couple counselor's definitions will necessarily influence how infidelity is worked with in the therapeutic space.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that defining infidelity presents a challenge not only for researchers but also for couple counselors working therapeutically with infidelity. Whilst the analysis confirms theory and prior research in so far as experienced couple counselors define infidelity both in terms of sexual intercourse and broader categories of sexual behaviors, and in terms of emotional infidelity and betrayal and secrets, it also demonstrates the existence of multiple, conflicting definitions of infidelity. This was exemplified with the definition of infidelity as extradyadic sexual intercourse, which was shown to be both common and commonly challenged in practitioners' experiences. Given the potential critiques of this definition outlined in the literature review, its persistence is perhaps puzzling; possibly the notion of extradyadic sexual intercourse as the most 'real' form of infidelity originates with social norms that prioritise sexual intercourse as 'real sex' over other forms of sexual activity (McPhillips, Braun & Gavey, 2001). Whatever the reason however, it is clear from this study that infidelity-as-sexual-intercourse is not a definition that, on its own, will work for couple counseling.

The study findings also demonstrated the difficulty in couple counseling practice of defining sexual infidelity in terms of broader categories of sexual behavior, due to the multiple meanings the same sexual behaviors can have. The analysis showed for example that the construal of the person who engaged in extradyadic sexual behavior was often different from that of their relationship partner, such that one might see a sexual behavior as infidelity while the other might not. This chimes with research which shows that viewer perspective impacts on the perception of behavior as sexual such that while masturbation with someone other than the

partner was seen as 'sex' by only 4% of participants in one study, it was seen as sexual infidelity by 95% of participants (Randall & Byers, 2003). These findings demonstrate the intrinsic challenges of the list-of-sexual-behaviors approach to infidelity, which is that individuals are likely to change their minds about which behaviors should be on the list depending on their context. Hence, defining infidelity in terms of sexual behavior broadly does not solve the definitional problem for couple counselors.

The findings of this study also evidenced that participants perceived couples to present with emotional infidelity concerns. Yet the analysis suggested not only that the same behavior may sometimes be perceived as infidelity and sometimes not but also that even couple counselors were confused by the definitional fluidity. This confusion may partly relate to the fact that the distinction between emotional and sexual infidelity is hard to make in practice (Johnson, 2005), even if this is a foundational idea in the evolutionary psychology literature on the subject. Although, in people's lived experience, emotional infidelity is not easily separable from sexual infidelity, perhaps the idea of emotional infidelity is nonetheless useful if it is construed in terms of involvement with another to the extent of negative impact on the primary relationship. This idea is behind the definition of infidelity in terms of having an intimate conversation with a friend, a construction of infidelity which is found in both this analysis and in the research literature (e.g. Luo et al., 2010). The difficulty, however, is that this definition clearly implicates non-romantic/sexual friendships which relationship partners themselves do not see as problematic. In addition, the notion of over-engagement in hobbies as potentially a form of infidelity is a logical extension of this construal of infidelity in terms of distraction from the primary relationship. Hobbies-as-infidelity is an idea that is present not only in this analysis but

also in the literature written by clinicians, with for example Johnson (2005) suggesting that work, addiction, religious affiliations, children and family-of-origin variously can all function as ‘an affair’. Yet while it may be eminently logical to define infidelity this way it does not seem eminently sensible since it allows any of a huge range of activities to potentially be labelled as infidelity. The emotional infidelity definition thus also appears unsatisfactory both for research and for couple counseling.

Having argued for the inadequacy of infidelity definitions that are widely used in the literature and presented in the data of this study (infidelity as sexual intercourse, sexual infidelity and emotional infidelity), the remainder of this section will outline the implications that can be drawn from the definitional difficulties for therapeutic practice and future research.

### *Implications for therapeutic practice*

The presence of multiple conflicting definitions is consistent with the idea of infidelity as socially constructed (Carpenter, 2001), which in turns shifts consideration of infidelity from something that exists ‘out there’ (and can be charted/defined) to something that individuals construct rhetorically. This view of infidelity would be congruent with the recognition that individuals flexibly use socially normative definitions of infidelity to present and understand their own and partner behavior (Edwards, 1995). It also explains how one person is able to reject charges of infidelity by claiming that extra-dyadic activity was ‘just sex’ and another to deny infidelity on the grounds that there was no sex. This understanding suggests that partners use different definitions of infidelity in the context of couple counseling to negotiate blame and

accountability and to assign or refute moral responsibility for solving the couple problem (Edwards, 1999).

A social constructionist view of infidelity supports the idea of eye-of-the-beholder definitions of infidelity, with the advantage that no one is excluded and no definition is privileged over another. A number of practitioner-theorists propound this relativist definition of infidelity for therapeutic work with couples (e.g. Hertlein & Weeks, 2007; Whisman & Wagers, 2005) and emphasize the importance of considering the idiosyncratic meanings of affairs (Levine, 1998). Such an approach appreciates all perspectives as valid within some particular context and can help counsellors to maintain a curious yet impartial and empathic position towards both partners (Reibstein, 2013). In contrast to researchers, for whom the issue of definitions has considerable relevance, this suggests that for practitioners the focus is not on the ultimate definition or ‘true’ meaning of infidelity but on the impact of different possible perspectives and their usefulness for the couple (Levine, 2005).

A social constructionist systemic perspective (McNamee & Gergen, 1992) also implies that the counselor in couple counseling is inevitably part of the rhetorical environment. Practitioners should therefore accept the idea that they have a role in co-constructing definitions of infidelity with couples. Potentially this could involve challenging partner definitions as well as owning the influence of their own context (history, culture, training) on how they, as couple counselors, think about infidelity.

*Limitations of the research and implications for future research*

The advantage of the sample used in the study was that each respondent had experience of multiple relationships where infidelity presented; however each account was from the perspective of practitioners, thus second-hand. Future research could usefully qualitatively explore first-hand experiences of clients. Participants in this study also gave retrospective accounts of their work; future research could explore how definitions of infidelity are co-constructed by couple counselors and clients across sessions. Additionally, given the argument made here that definitions of infidelity are inescapably influenced by context, it is a limitation that all participants were white, British and from one counselling centre in South West England. In future it would be useful to explore this issue in different national settings as well as within diverse couple counselling contexts and cultural and regional groups within Britain. More generally, the bulk of empirical investigation of infidelity is quantitative and rooted within an essentialist or positivist epistemological framework. A conclusion to be drawn from this study is that researchers may want to re-think their approach to studying infidelity if they want their research to be useful to practitioners. Whilst the proposed idea of infidelity as something that is socially constructed might be challenging for quantitative researchers (how to interpret study results if participants are all referencing different types of infidelity?), embracing this perspective offers the possibility to develop a better understanding of the different ways in which people construct the meaning of infidelity (e.g. in emotional discourse, Edwards, 1999) and act in relation to these.

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