The Social Logic of Contributory Behaviour:
Subcultures and Styles of Volunteering
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Introduction

Volunteering as behaviour is an intriguing field of study, not least because of the challenges it mounts to models of the individualistic rational self-maximizer (Chapman, 2001). The motivations for volunteering are as many and complex. We now possess considerable data that measures behaviours, attitudes and motivations of people who volunteer in Canada (NSGVP, 2000). While these valuable studies have found certain contextual and personal factors such as education, income, family size, marital status, and religion to be statistically significant in explaining differences in contributory behaviours, they tell us, directly, little about the social reasoning which leads to the decision to volunteer. Social reasoning needs to be regarded as a central element in understanding the nature and logic of contributory behaviour. Although references to values, beliefs and meanings have been present in the literature on volunteering, the treatment of this dimension and its concepts has been less than satisfactory. In fact, analyses have mainly discussed their role statically and descriptively.

The present study moves into this uncharted territory. It focuses on the social reasoning of volunteering, with particular concern for the self-described motives of volunteers. We examine people's language (both the meaning and the choice of vocabulary) used to describe their experience. To understand the decision-making associated with volunteering, we undertook detailed open-ended interviews with a

nationally selected sample of 350 individuals across Canada. Based on a qualitative analysis of these interviews, we examined the language and apparent meanings respondents used to describe the reasoning associated with decisions concerning volunteering and giving. In this paper, we report the results from a ethnographic and discourse analysis of responses from a francophone population compared with those from the predominant anglophone population in Canada (Jorgenson and Phillips, 2002; Phillips and Hardy, 2002; Altheide, 1987).

Our analysis revealed a mixed pattern of commonality and diversity in the thought and speech of "contributory" people. While a general intention to contribute to the common good predominated, there were significant and oftentimes large, systematic differences in individuals' view of what comprised the common good and the "social" that underlay their contributing to it, revealing different civic and religious traditions (Reed and Selbee, 2001; Bellah et al, 1985; Fowler, 2000). Illustrative of the differences between francophone and anglophone sensibilities, francophones consistently displayed a *general* concern for the collective well-being as a motivating factor in their decision to be volunteers and charitable donors. Beyond the particularly evident differences in worldview and decision-making between the two linguistic subpopulations, there were also distinctive types or styles of contributory behaviours on which we will comment in this paper.

Why volunteer?

It has been theorized that volunteerism responds to certain motives, or needs, inherent in one's personality and socialization (Clary et al, 1998). Furthermore, they argue that the same volunteer function can meet *different needs* for *different individuals*. Others argue that volunteerism serves a collective or community-based function. In this context, volunteering becomes an activity of social cohesion and social capital. This type of volunteering is evident among tightly-knit and homogeneous communities, or among communities that have a high collective identification. In this sense, benefitting the community benefits one's self (Eckstein, 2001, Simon, Sturmer and Steffens 2000).

Functionalist researchers posit as many as six psychological functions met by volunteering: values (altruism, concern for others); understanding (new learning experiences); social (building relationships with other people); career (developing career-related skills); protective (protecting from negative self-image); and enhancement (building positive mood) (Clary et al, 1998). Similarly, Batson and Ahmad chart four traits that motivate people to care about others: egoism, altruism, collectivism, and principlism (Batson and Ahmad, 2002). Caution, however, is in order when examining the functionalist model of volunteering. The model places significant emphasis on individual motivations to volunteer, regardless of how those motives manifest themselves. As a result, such a model may not adequately capture the importance of *contextual* factors (Wilson, 2000, Eckstein, 2001).

The functionalist literature also does little to clarify the basis of the 'prosocial personality', and may present an overly simplified and static definition of varied 'volunteer behaviour' (Wilson, 2000; Paolicchi, 1995). In fact, these analyses tend to focus on the function of volunteering at the expense of studying the processes by which

people define and give meaning to volunteering. What is important is not merely the end pursued by volunteers, but the manner in which the pursuit of the collective good is interpreted as well as the generation and diffusion of those interpretations.

The methodology employed by functionalist theorists may also prove insufficient in capturing the nuances of volunteer motivations and behaviours. Functionalist studies generally involve ranking a predetermined set of motives on a scale (Karniol, Grosz and Schorr, 2003; Clary et al, 1998; Omoto and Snyder, 1995; Simon, Sturmer and Steffens, 2000). In fact, an open-ended probe study (in which volunteers were asked to self-identify their motives) identified three additional motives (Allison, Okun and Dutridge, 2002): religiosity; enjoyment, and, team-building.

While substantial research has been done on volunteer motives and behaviours, the *social reasoning* behind the decision to become a volunteer remains largely unarticulated. This is a rich potentially field of study, which can be examined from a variety of perspectives. While functionalist and quantitative studies of volunteering may shed light on motivation for volunteering, it is important, as in all sciences, to utilize a variety of techniques to probe such a behaviour. Of specific value may be the study of volunteer *narratives and discourse*, which may provide a more nuanced picture of volunteer thought processes, which will include motivations and behaviours of course.

Discourse analysis and social reasoning

Discourse analysis has gained prominence over the past decade in a variety of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and political science (Phillips and

Jorgensen, 2002). Analysis has suggested that discourse operates at two levels. It encompasses ways by which self-identity arises, as well as interpretative and discursive practices that shape people's understanding of their condition (McAdam et al., 1996, 2001; Tarrow, 1998). At a microlevel, the decision to volunteer is constructed through interpretations made by individuals. We must first recognize the individual's participation and representation of his or her identity, interests and action. These interpretative frames organise sets of behaviours and individual lifestyles. Individuals assign meaning to events and situations. Opportunities do not necessarily exist as objective facts; they are always "situational" or context-dependent. The key factor here is the perceptions on the part of individuals. In some cases, actors may respond to what they believe is an "opening" or opportunity they decide to respond to. Others may identify a need, and seek out organizations to volunteer, thereby creating their own opportunities. In this case, the subjective perception of need is a determining factor.

Volunteering is a very specific commitment made in a particular setting by a particular person. As a result, the decision is negotiated with others with whom the individual is in contact -- family, friends, and the others in the local community; hence the importance of social networks in the recruitment of volunteers. Friends and family create opportunities for others to participate by sharing their experience, by serving as role models, and by extending the possibility of participating through invitation.

The decision to volunteer, however, is also framed by expectations and understanding of roles and responsibilities. At the macro level, there also exists "master frame" or "meta-narrative" through which the world is framed and set in context (Gerhards & Rucht, 1992; Diani, 1996; Steinberg, 1996; Steinberg, 1998; Nylander,

2000; Gottweis, 1998). These meta-narratives may be incorporated into the identity of the volunteer and they pattern what people learn as members of a culture and the way people understand the implicit social contract. It shapes their construction of the common good, and the extent to which volunteers see their action as supporting or contributing to the common good. They are norms and fundamental assumptions and beliefs that a group of individuals share about reality, which they use to organize their understanding of the implicit social contract and the role that defines the relationship between the individual and society. They are collectively generated and shared. These interpretative and explanatory discourses embody an array of assumptions and principles, through which people interpret events, define the kinds of issues that should be considered a social problem, suggest the roles and responsibilities of each actors, and guides their action. They assign value to certain actions – such as volunteering. Individuals' identity and interests are closely associated with these frames of reference.

It is our contention that both these levels of discourse are intertwined with several factors in the process of making the decision to volunteer. The first part of the analysis focuses on the volunteers themselves, how they story, construct and understand the role of volunteer as they themselves enacted it. The second part of the analysis focuses on the meta narratives and attempts to identify subcultures and styles of volunteering which are specific to each context. Each region under examination represents a distinct cultural and institutional environment which influences and defines to a certain extent the way people value volunteering.

Individuals Making Choices

People reason and solve problems in everyday live in a variety of ways. Some individuals are very reflective and weight different options carefully before making a decision. Others process information more instinctively and make decisions relatively quickly. Our study revealed a pattern of commonality and diversity in the thought and speech of volunteers, entailing five basic repertoires of thought which accounted for why people made the decision to become a volunteer: identity-based, altruistic, social, instrumental and situational.[1]

The first of these repertoires is identity-based. People in this category see volunteering is an integral part of who they are, how they define themselves and how they perceive their place in society. They employ a language in which their notion of self is tied to their volunteer activity. For example, quotes abound such as, "it is part of life, as a community-minded good Christian"; "I'm a people-person"; "I'm a social butterfly", "I'm a doer, a people-person", and "It's a natural thing to do; it is who I am". For these individuals, volunteering is a "natural" component in their way of life. They are often involved in multiple volunteer activities and tend to remain involved throughout their life span.[2] They describe volunteering as an important element in the process of personal growth and personal satisfaction. For many of these individuals, religious values and principles play an important role in shaping their understanding of actions they identify

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[1] We use the concept of repertoires of thought in order to underline that individuals may revert to multiple patterns of thought, at different times. Volunteers who engage in multiple activities often have multiple reasons to do so, which are specific to each decision.

[2] There is a small "civic core" of strongly involved individuals in Canada who not only engage in a mix of formal volunteering, direct helping, charitable giving and civic activities, but do so over a large part of their lives (Reed and Selbee 2000a, b; 2001; 2002).

with. Because volunteering is so strongly tied to their self-identification, their decision to volunteer is generally made quickly and without deliberation.

The second element in the repertoire of thought is altruistic. This category is the smallest among those identified, with the exception of the francophone population, but we will deal with this contextual characteristic of volunteering in Quebec in a following section. This group of individuals generally volunteer because they identify a need. They essentially view their volunteering as being for others, for those in need, for the greater good, or for community. There decision to volunteer is often coupled with a strong sense of moral, civic or religious duty. Because of the moral dimension, there is little overlap between the discourses associated with identity and altruism. However, for us the distinctive feature of this second category is the absence of references to self and identity. Another important distinction is that this group tends to make decisions carefully. They tend to be proactive in their volunteering, in that they will seek out an opportunity to volunteer when they see a need. As a result, they gather information on the organization they would like to join and they weight different alternatives in order to volunteer where need is most present. Contrary to the first group, these individuals tend not to volunteer within a variety of groups, but rather will invest themselves in one organization or cause. As a result, they tend over time to move from one organization to another, where perceived needs take them.

The third repertoire of thought is dominated by a social dimension. Individuals in this category are mostly interested in the convivial aspects of volunteering. They enjoy meeting people, socializing, and networking, and tend to gravitate towards these types of activities. They tend to make their decision to volunteer based on their social connections

to the said organization or activity. These individuals also tend to have relatively elaborate social networks. As a consequence, they also tend to be involved in multiple activities, drawn to new activities through friends, colleagues, or previous involvement in the organization. While some may value the importance volunteering in fostering a sense of community, the majority clearly volunteers for the pure enjoyment of social contact.

The fourth element in the repertoire of thought is instrumental. Individuals explain their decision to volunteer out of a desire to gain new experiences and new skills. They have a specific agenda or interest, and they seek out organizations for relevant support. They tend to seek out their volunteering activity after careful deliberation and information-gathering. They, too, are proactive in that they approach the organization for which they want to volunteer. Here, compatibility is important. Before embarking on their volunteering activity, they often need to be reassured, to feel competent and capable of contributing effectively. These volunteers tend to be transient, in that after a couple of years, they generally stop volunteering and focus on their careers or family lives. However, some have noted that while they began volunteering in order to gain some training and experience, they came to value it as an important part of their life.

This category is largely dominated by youth seeking out work experiences and hoping to develop new skills. In fact, other studies have already revealed that relative to older (50+) people, younger people prefer volunteering over donating, and prefer to volunteer their involvement in sports- and hobby-oriented activities (Reed and Selbee, 2000a). Another important characteristic of this subgroup is that men show a preference for physical activity in their volunteering. This is consistent with prior research which has

shown that women prefer volunteer activities that have a strong social element and are concerned with health and social services (Reed and Selbee 2000a, b; 2001; 2002).[3]

A final element in the repertoire of thought is the situational orientation. A large number of individuals come to volunteer because of an event that occurred in their life. They describe these events as life-changing and therapeutic. For these people, volunteering offers not only a way to cope with a serious illness or a death in the family, for example, but also provides a way to "give back" because of the support they received in their time of need.[4] In fact, the language of reciprocity permeates their description of the process that led them to volunteer. For these individuals, volunteering becomes an important part of their way of life, and an activity that they come to value over time. However, contrary to the first group, they do not identity themselves as volunteers. While they may value the act of volunteering, their attachment is to a particular cause or organization and their commitment to volunteering is often long-term. They have often arrived at the decision to volunteer through extended deliberation, a process that is linked to their grieving process.

A subgroup of individuals, for which their volunteering experience is radically different, but which is triggered by a situational factor, is parents of young children who enter school or begin a new activity. Several studies have proven significant the presence of dependent children in the household between the ages of 6-17. In fact, about 20% of our sample directly attributed their involvement in a volunteer activity to the participation of their kids in that activity. However, contrary to the previous group of individuals for

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[3] There are, it is worth noting, no male-female differences in involvement in higher-status volunteer activities such as decision-making, supervising, organizing, education etc

[4] Interestingly, retirement is also described as a life changing event, which fosters for many a desire to get out and break the solitude, rebuild their social networks.

whom an event had a significant impact on their perception of volunteering, this latter category's involvement in volunteering tended to be temporary, tied directly related to their children's participation. The reasons they cited for their participation were also significantly different: to be a part of their children's life, to set an example and be a role model, and perhaps somewhat different, to build a stronger community for them. What is similar, however, is that both these categories became involved because of a particular event or situation. Their decision to volunteer is reactive. It is safe to assume, based on past behaviour, that without that turning point, they would probably not become involved in volunteering.

An essential aspect of volunteering that we detected in our analysis is that it becomes multidimensional and self-reinforcing. Although individuals may begin volunteering for a specific cause or reason, many end up learning from the experience and valuing the contribution it brings to their life. This is consistent with research that focuses on temporal models of volunteer engagement over time. While the literature shows some debate as to the relative importance of 'antecedents' on sustained volunteerism (Penner, 2002, Omoto and Snyder, 1995, Nassar-McMillan and Lambert, 2003); this model demonstrates that initial factors (antecedents), such as demographics, personal beliefs, prosocial personality, volunteer-related motives, and social pressure contribute to the initial decision to volunteer. Of secondary importance in the initial decision to volunteer are situational factors (such as the chaos surrounding September 11 in contemporary circumstances), and the attributes of or relationship to the volunteer organization (Penner, 2002, Omoto and Snyder, 1995). Following this structural model, the initial decision to volunteer is itself the primary determinant of subsequent

volunteerism. The volunteer's experiences, including satisfaction with the work, integration into the organization, and in some cases preparation, all contribute to the longevity of volunteerism (Brudney, 1990, Nassar-McMillan and Lambert, 2003). Demographic and motivational considerations, while they may exert some influence on sustained volunteerism, likely play a reduced role.

Repertoires of thought not only help us understand how individuals came to make the decision to volunteer, but they also enable us to better grasp what type of activities these individuals will gravitate towards.

In the next section, we turn to consider aggregate trends across cultural contexts.

Cultural context

There are significant, even stand-out differences, revealed by from our survey, across cultural context. Studies have already demonstrated that volunteering can vary depending on one's community of origin (Eckstein, 2001). Collectivistic, or group-based, giving elicits a different 'type' of volunteer than does individualistic giving (Simon, Sturmer and Steffens, 2000), and preliminary research into collectivistic giving shows that demographics in these cases may differ from survey results (Eckstein, 2001). Our sample's respondents were distributed across Canada's five regions: British Columbia, the Prairies, Ontario, Quebec and the Atlantic provinces. As we will see, each area's volunteers manifested a distinctive conception of the collective good and showed varied patterns in their reasons for volunteering.

Our first regional group located in British Columbia displayed distinctive features. The meaning and pattern of volunteering was less linked to religion than was the case in any other region. Their discourse on volunteering was imprinted by a general trend towards individuality, in which motivations for volunteering tended to be tied to the individual's specific needs, self-interest and greater choice. In addition, a high number of volunteers valued skills training. Even the large majority of individuals who defined volunteering as being an integral part of their life did not use collective terms to describe their experience. While they did implicitly share in the idea that there is a collective good, this is rather ill-defined. In fact, only 7 out of 35 people interviewed connected volunteering with a broader conception of and concern for their community. The dominant reasoning fell more into a logic of individual gain as the majority of volunteers linked their decision-making to personal interests. Although we do not possess longitudinal data to assess trends in patterns of volunteering, one may wonder whether British Columbia's citizens have embarked on a move towards individualization and secularisation noted by Anheier and Salamon (Anheier and Salamon, 2001). This could for the distinctive trajectory of volunteering in British Columbia as compared to other regions, although it would pose the subsequent question, why such indivualization concentrated in British Columbia?

In the Prairies region, we find a very different discourse, one which is reflected in patterns of volunteering. Here, faith and religious belief play an important role in the narratives of volunteers. Another important feature of volunteering in the Prairies is the idealistic-altruistic nature of the discourse. People in the Prairies strongly believe in the moral value of volunteering and giving, without any expectations of personal benefit.

Examples of discourse illustrate this. People view volunteering as "a way of being part of the lives of others in a meaningful way"; "if everyone volunteered, just a little bit we'd have a better society"; "there is power in numbers"; "people should do unto others as they would like to be treated themselves"; "it's the backbone of our society, its what we are about"; and "it is part of a larger philosophy of helping out". In each of these quotes, we see the sense and importance of contributing to the larger public good. In fact, they share a language of mutual responsibility and practices of commitment to the greater good. However, this does not take a collectivist form. Individuals tend to shy away from the notion of community, of belonging, and do not generally use the language of "we".

By contrast, people in the Atlantic Provinces shared a strong sense of community, of belonging and mutual responsibility. Among our respondents, 25 of 40 explicitly recognized volunteering as an essential aspect of being part of community. They felt a strong sense of responsibility towards their neighbours and people in the community. Even those volunteers who may have been motivated by a particular goal, acknowledged the broader contribution that volunteering makes to the community. In both the Prairie and Atlantic regions, volunteering is seen as a civic necessity, the backbone of society, and the social glue that holds communities together.

In Ontario, a highly urban province like British Columbia, we found a strong sense of individualism in people's discourse. Only 7 out of 37 alluded to the importance of community. However, perhaps paradoxically, among these, two also made reference to their place in a global society and the need to also think globally about the broader community in which we all live. While this may not seem high, it is in fact the only such references to the interconnectedness of community with a broader environment in our

entire study. Our analysis did reveal important contextual and political factors which may

explain the absence of reference to community and to collectivity in the Ontario

discourse. The language used by volunteers was very critical of the provincial

government in power. Ten people in the full sample highlighted the impact of

governmental cutbacks on voluntary organizations and the quality of services,

particularly in areas of health care, education and elder care. This is unique to the Ontario

case. In no other region did we find similar comments, although similar trends have been

unfolding (Shields and Evans, 1998).

Our final region is particularly distinctive because of a number of cultural factors.

First, Quebec is dominantly populated by francophones of Roman Catholic faith or

identification. They have evolved in a very distinct cultural context. Since the Quiet

Revolution of the 1960s, the rise of nationalism has had a profound influence on the

patterns of collective orientation and action and on the structure of representation.[5] For

more than 30 years, politics in Quebec have been centred on the issue of independence,

and to a large extent nationalism has shaped the responses of community organizations to

political opportunities. From its inception, the community development movement has

championed a vision of society which recognized community participation as a

fundamental exercise in citizenship and democracy and as a means for empowering

citizens.[6] Principles of social justice and democracy have inspired its actions. Moreover,

the presence of an independence movement and a strong nationalist discourse has shaped

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[5] The Quiet Revolution is an important period of modernisation in Quebec history of profound social, economic and cultural change extending from 1960 to 1966. Prior to this Quebec was characterized by traditionalism, conservatism and, generally, a rejection of contemporary ways and values.

[6] (Noël, 1996; Vaillancourt et Laville, 1998; Paul R. Bélanger and Benoît Lévesque, "Le mouvement populaire et communautaire: de la revendication au partenariat (1963-1992)", in Daigle, Gérard and Rocher, *Le Québec en jeu*, Montréal, Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1992.

the public discourse in profound ways. In fact, one needs to recognize that in Quebec, the community development movement still bears important ties to nationalist discourse and a vision of Quebec society which is just and egalitarian. Non-government organizations embrace a vision of Quebec society where democracy, the exercise of citizenship and social participation should be enhanced, and where citizens should have a say in the governance of their daily lives. This discourse ties organizations of civil society together around a common *project of society* and a series of shared goals which permeate their struggle.

This has had an important impact on the patterns of volunteering in Quebec because volunteers are directly involved in these community organizations. In fact, Quebec respondents in our sample revealed a general concern for the collective well-being as a motivating factor in their decision to be volunteers. This discourse was embedded in discussions of equality, fairness, and reciprocal rights. People in Quebec alluded to notions of solidarity with the poor, compassion for those in need, identifying with misery and suffering. For example, individuals explained their motives for volunteering as follows: "moral obligation towards others"; "volunteering is very important; we can't wait for others otherwise we would be in misery"; "I had been transferred to the city and then saw the misery that I was not accustomed to in the country"; "I was interested in serving the public good, it's for that principle"; and "I saw the statistics about the level of literacy in rural regions in Quebec and it was horrible — I had to get involved." Volunteers, we found, have an elaborate vocabulary of duty and social responsibility. Most tend to value common standards of justice and equality as an integral part of their vision of collectivity. As a result, the types of organizations towards

which volunteers gravitate are also slightly distinct in that they tend to be output-oriented, focused on social need and reducing inequality. In fact, prior research has shown that, relative to other regions, Quebeckers have a clear preference for charitable giving over formal volunteering and an elevated orientation to direct informal helping. Prairie province residents display the opposite pattern with a preference for formal volunteering over charitable giving (Reed and Selbee 2000a, b; 2001; 2002).

Interestingly, few Quebeckers in our sample stated that they volunteered to develop skills. While one mentioned it was their initial motivation, "at the beginning I had a lit of personal ambition and I thought it would help at a professional level, but I quickly realized through the many thanks that I got that it was more important than that, through humility." In this particular context, the logic of the social good and collective benefit predominates over a logic of individual advantage or gain.

As we have seen, we can illustrate different contributory styles and the collectivities they are associated with via a handful of real examples. Up to this point, our observations have been based on information drawn from open interviews with 350 Canadian residents between 1999 and 2000. That project, on the social reasoning associated with decisions to volunteer or make donations (or not), was one of nearly forty that have been completed under the auspices of the Nonprofit Sector Knowledge Base Project, whose objective is to construct a coherent picture of the social dynamics that underlie contributory behaviours (see, for example, Reed and Selbee 2000a, b; 2001; 2002). A number of those other studies have provided extensive evidence of styles of contributing, styles that exist both for individuals and for particular collectivities in Canada. These styles comprise distinctive combinations of the following elements or

dimensions: volunteering vs. donating, or both; formal vs. informal/direct mode of helping and giving; variations in the intensity of volunteering, high vs. low; one-time vs. ongoing contributing (also related: regular vs. episodic, and intentional vs. incidental); religious vs. secular organization; broad vs. narrow span of benefit; variations across organizational domains: health, social services, religious, sports, etc.; social distance or proximity of beneficiaries; and a variety and mix of motives, self-interest vs. altruism.

Conclusion

As this report on our study of social reasoning has demonstrated, there are marked patterns of commonality in the language and discourse of volunteers. The decision to volunteer is not always a simple one and must be understood both in light of individual deliberations and in light of the broader social context that individuals are embedded in. Individual experiences, ideals and values, and contextual social norms shape the way people view the world and come to attribute meaning to the act of volunteering. This analysis of social reasoning extends our understanding of volunteering and giving beyond that derived from the relatively mechanical analysis of motives as "reasons" selected from a list of possibilities, and illuminates the different ways these contributory behaviours are perceived and activated in different subcultural contexts.

In Canada, the broad diversity of settings and historical contexts have shaped distinctive patterns of volunteering and giving. Evidently, then, there is extensive heterogeneity across contributory behaviours in Canada, yet within that heterogeneity there are distinct clusters of elements that constitute identifiable subcultures and styles.

Volunteering and giving are rather more "lumpy" phenomena, and less smooth and homogeneous, than either general discourse or analytical treatment of them acknowledges. We can think of no reason why the same should not hold true in most other societies as well. This suggests that understanding the social dynamics that give rise to the heterogeneity in volunteering and giving will be strengthened if their subcultures and styles are recognized and probed in substantive detail.

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