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Beyond Doing No Harm: A Call for Participatory Action Research with Marginalized Populations in Criminological Research

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Abstract While most social scientists agree that the outcome of research should be useful in the real world, the idea that research can, and should, be empowering and directly useful to research participants has largely been limited to the margins of a few social science disciplines. While community psychologists and critical sociologists have long embraced participatory research and co-operative inquiry approaches—where the empowerment of research participants is as important as the contribution to knowledge and policy development—criminologists have been slow to adopt more emancipatory research models except for a few notable exceptions. This essay calls for the use of participatory action research by criminologists and for us to have a dialogue about the social value of our research and our obligations to research participants beyond "simply doing no harm."

> To what uses are experiences of suffering put? (Kleinman and Kleinman 1996)

I am struggling to finish a paper that I have been working on for some time. It details the life histories of 25 low-income African-American battered women taken from a larger sample of 43 ethnically diverse battered women. I am conflicted about it because I am afraid of further marginalizing or reinforcing negative stereotypes about poor black women.[1] No matter how much I try to humanize the women by focusing on their strengths, detailing their acts of resistance and emphasizing their hopes for the future, as well as placing their stories in a wider structural context, what stands out most about these women's narratives is how downtrodden they are. I have begun to question the utility of exposing sensationalistic stories of abuse, oppression and criminalization of poor black

[1] I am acutely aware that low-income minority women's voices are frequently excluded from public discourse, and that when they are represented, they are often stereotyped or demonized. See Allard's discussion on racial stereotypes of black women as the shrill, nagging, aggressive Sapphire; wanton, libidinous shameless Jezebel; or the invincible, manly Sojourner Truth (Allard 1991). Similarly, West warns against the tendency of characterizing African American battered women as tough and resilient thereby denying the anguish of black battered women (West 1999).

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women. How does such research actually benefit the participants of my study or similarly situated battered women?

I was initially motivated to write about low-income African American battered women because I felt that it was important to focus scholarly attention on the women most at risk of severe and lethal domestic abuse. Contrary to the popular contention that domestic violence affects all women equally, empirical evidence has found that low-income African American women are disproportionately at risk of being severely abused or killed by their intimate partners compared to their higher income white and black counterparts (Hampton and Gelles 1994; Rennison and Welchans 2000; Straus et al. 1980; Websdale 1999). My hope was that this study, however small, would illustrate the extent of the suffering and oppression of participants and that findings could be used to justify allocating more resources to address the many concurrent problems of racially and economically marginalized battered women.

My study details the key events and social contexts that shaped the trajectory of the lives of 25 low-income African American women from Brooklyn. As teenagers, the women in my study tried to escape intolerable conditions—abuse, neglect, parental substance abuse and loss—by running away, getting into early sexual relationships and/or experimenting with drugs. However, these coping strategies soon sent them "from the frying pan to the fire," as one woman put it, when they found themselves in dangerous relationships with men who had once sheltered them but were now increasingly controlling and abusive. For many, teen pregnancy and drug addiction further limited their life chances by interrupting their educations and keeping them emotionally and financially dependent on others. In the most extreme cases, women ended up on the street, in the criminal justice system, and/or contracting HIV (Dupont 2006, unpublished manuscript). By the time I spoke with them, the women were still living on the margins of society economically and socially but most had nonetheless managed to get out of abusive relationships and were in recovery.[2]

These findings are consistent with other research which maintains that low-income African-American women experience a "continuum of risk" of repeat victimization, both in the home and on the street, and a wide range of interconnected problems including childhood physical and sexual abuse (Browne 1993; Muehlenhard et al. 1998; Wyatt et al. 1992), homelessness (Browne and Bassuk 1997; New York City Department of Homeless Services 2003), substance abuse (Browne 1993; Harlow 1999; Sterk 1999), criminalization (see Gilfus 2002; Richie 1996; Arnold 1995; Chesney-Lind 1989),[3] and HIV infection (New York State AIDS Advisory Council 2005; Cohen et al. 2000).[4] Having said that, researchers tend to agree that race itself is not the explanatory factor for African-American women's "continuum of risk;" racial disparities have more to do with poverty, social

[2] Since I chose to interview survivors of domestic violence for safety reasons, most of the women were in their thirties and early forties by the time I spoke to them.

[3] The war on drugs, waged primarily in low-income minority communities, has disproportionately impacted black women of color. In 2006, African American women made up 48% of prisoners in New York State facilities, compared with 24% Latinas and 28% whites (New York State Department of Correctional Services 2006).

[4] The women who are at greatest risk of abuse are demographically similar to women at risk of HIV infection (Cohen et al. 2000). Low-income African American women are disproportionately represented: the rate of HIV infection among African-American women in New York is more than 27 times higher than that of white women of all AIDS cases among women (New York State AIDS Advisory Council 2005). A study investigating risk factors for HIV infection found that when controlling for income, race did not appear to be a specific risk factor for HIV, however, poverty and exposure to early and chronic violence are among the best predictors of HIV infection (Wyatt et al. 2002, p. 66).

inequalities and their consequences (Currie 1998; Hampton et al. 2003; Zierler and Krieger 1997).

Even though I felt that disenfranchised women's voices needed to be heard over those of their more privileged counterparts, I was never completely comfortable with the inherent power imbalance between me, a white, middle class academic, and my research participants (low-income African-American women who were, for the most, not educated beyond high school). As the researcher, I asked the questions, decided what was relevant and what should be cut from the narratives, and made the final decision about how the findings should be presented and used. This approach may not be problematic when studying populations where the playing field between researcher and researched is relatively even (in terms of educational attainment, socio-economic status, race, and gender); however, with marginalized populations, the power imbalance is substantial and the dynamics of traditional research can be exploitive.

I felt awkward about asking women to share their most painful experiences of victimization with me, a total stranger, in exchange for a small fee (in this case $20) and the vague assurance that the information would hopefully one day be used to "help other battered women." One participant in my study sensed my discomfort and asked me if I "felt strange about paying women for their stories." I did, because it felt like such an uneven exchange. When I said to my participants that the research would benefit others, they may have taken this statement more literally than it was meant. One should not assume that research participants share a common understanding of the purpose of research and the role of the academic and academia.

That is not to say that my desire to make a difference in the lives of battered women was disingenuous, but researchers understand that any contribution to the welfare of research participants or similarly situated populations is usually indirect and long-term. In concrete terms, academics can benefit considerably from research. They may earn tenure and promotion, win awards, give talks and interviews, and make book deals "through the appropriation of images [and accounts] of suffering" (Kleinman and Kleinman 1996). It is not as clear what research subjects gain from their participation in research aside from the satisfaction of having contributed to scientific knowledge (which may or may not be used to help other women in the future) and perhaps the catharsis of telling their story.

The "publish or perish" requirement of academia means that the products of research become the means to obtain tenure and promotion. In fact, in all of my years of graduate school (in the mid to late 1990s), the *social value* of research and our responsibility to those being researched was rarely discussed. Because our primary concern was to get our dissertation proposals approved, my peers and I largely regarded the Institutional Review Board's (IRB) approval process as a barrier that prevented us from gaining access to research subjects. Beyond the requirements of "doing no harm," we were not encouraged to consider additional obligations to our research participants by considering research projects that were empowering or directly useful to them and their communities.

That is not to say that criminal justice research has not impacted policy. There has been an increased pressure on all social scientists—particularly by funders—to make research more "policy-relevant." Perhaps because of its practitioner slant and close alliance with the criminal justice system, criminology is ideally suited to applied research. There have been many high profile research projects that have had a direct effect on criminal justice policy. The near-universal adoption of mandatory and preferred arrest domestic violence policies in the United States is, in great part, attributable to the Minneapolis Domestic Violence Experiment in the 1980s (Sherman and Berk 1984). Similarly, the Boston Gun Project was a "problem-solving" research project that led to the "pulling levers" strategy

attributed to reducing gang violence during the 1990s that entailed reaching out to gangs and threatening to "pull every lever" legally available to crack down on violence. This included disrupting street-level drug markets, serving warrants, mounting federal prosecutions, and changing the conditions of community supervision for targeted probationers and parolees (Braga et al. 2001; Kennedy 1998).

While most social scientists agree that the outcome of research should be useful in the real world (although some express concern over the blurred lines of researcher and policy influencer[5]), the idea that research can, and should, be empowering and directly useful to *research participants* has been limited to the margins of a few social science disciplines. While community psychologists and critical sociologists have long embraced participatory research and co-operative inquiry approaches—where the empowerment of research participants is as important as the contribution to knowledge and policy development—criminologists have been slow to adopt more emancipatory research models except for a few notable exceptions. For example, Beth Richie's (1996) classic qualitative study of incarcerated battered women humanized this segment of female offenders by identifying the pathways that led them from victimization to crime. Similarly, Arnold (1995) and Chesney-Lind (1989) illustrated that girls' coping strategies—like running away from abusive homes—often placed them at risk of criminal involvement because of their vulnerability to further abuse and the need to survive on the street.

Astonishingly, the largest professional association for criminologists, the American Society of Criminology (ASC), has not even formally adopted a code of ethics for criminal justice research. Its smaller, more practitioner-oriented sister organization, the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (ACJS), has instituted a code of conduct that includes a small section on research ethics, but it is insufficient. For example, the ACJS code of ethics acknowledges that "special actions will be necessary where the individuals studied are illiterate, under correctional supervision, minors, have low social status, are under judicial supervision, have diminished capacity, are unfamiliar with social research or otherwise occupy a position of unequal power with the researcher," but it does not outline what kinds of "special actions" should be taken. The ACJS code simply emphasizes avoiding risks to research subjects that are "greater than the risks of everyday life" (Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences 2000).

Given the fact that so much criminal justice research focuses on some of society's most disenfranchised groups—victims, prisoners, drug addicts and offenders who are predominantly from low-income communities of color—there should be more dialogue in our profession about ethics related to the study of marginalized individuals and communities.[6] Up until now, the focus of the discussion on our responsibility to research participants has largely been on the avoidance of unethical treatment of research subjects (characterized

[5] Some social scientists express concern over the "policy-relevant" turn in research (see Garvin and Lee 2003). The authors contend that one danger of doing research with the goal of influencing policy is the expansion of the role of researcher to one of activist and policy influencer. Taking a political stand runs counter to the traditional assumption of clinical dissociation in social science.

[6] It is very unusual for criminologists to study the "powerful". Like the rest of society, we are accustomed to regarding the crimes of the lower-classes as more severe and dangerous than those of the powerful. As Reiman argues, this may not be the case if we take into account all of the avoidable deaths attributable to harmful work conditions, unnecessary surgeries, and exposure to dangerous toxins (Reiman 2006). Another reason for the focus on lower-class crime and victimization is the inaccessibility of research participants from more racially and economically privileged backgrounds. For example, recruiting higher income battered women would have been incredibly difficult. Higher income women are not accustomed to being studied, are rarely enticed by financial compensation, and tend to seek help from private physicians, therapists, and lawyers who are reluctant to share information about and deny access to their clients.

most famously by the Zimbardo Prison Experiment[7]). Paradis (2000), a community psychologist[8] argues that researchers must go beyond the paradigm of the "avoidance of harm" to an active investment in the well-being of marginalized individuals and communities and replace it with an "ethic of empowerment".

While there have been many excellent qualitative research studies of marginalized communities related to criminal justice issues, particularly by feminists and critical sociologists (see Richie 1996; Chesney-Lind 1989; Fine and Torre 2006; Raphael 2000), I believe that there is room for many more emancipatory criminological research projects where research participants take an active role in the process and where their empowerment is as important as the accumulation of knowledge and the development of policy.

Participatory Action Research

There are many models of participatory research (most often used by community psychologists and critical sociologists) including co-operative inquiry, participatory action research (PAR), action inquiry and many others (see Reason 1994). All of these approaches agree that knowledge is gained through the "systematic testing of theory in live-action" and that the main purpose of research is to *change* the experience of research participants for the better (Reason 1994).

Participatory research approaches challenge the view that reality can be captured objectively, as orthodox scientists would have us believe. As Paulo Freire (1982, p. 30) suggests, "concrete reality is the connection between subjectivity and objectivity, never objectivity isolated from subjectivity". Skolimowski (1992, p. 20) succinctly describes this principle when he says, "we always partake of what we describe". This viewpoint is in stark contrast to the orthodox scientific practice of rigidly maintaining a separation between researcher and subject in order to avoid influencing the reality one seeks to measure or describe.

For the researcher engaged in participatory research, there is no singular truth "out there" to be discovered. Proponents of such approaches disintegrate the traditional divisions between researcher/researched, objectivity/subjectivity, rationality/feeling, and knowledge/action. They regard research participants as co-researchers, use a dialectic process that recognizes ways of knowing beyond rationality, and favor "critical subjectivity"[9] over the notion of a verifiable truth, and place action on equal footing with the quest for knowledge. Some social scientists will no doubt disapprove of methods unable to produce "valid" results based on the criteria of orthodox scientific principles.

[7] The Stanford Prison Experiment was a psychological study conducted in 1971 by a team of researchers led by Philip Zimbardo of Stamford University. The study was about the effect of captivity on both prisoners and guards, but the experiment soon became synonymous with unethical treatment of research subjects when some of the "guards" started to act sadistically toward some of the "prisoners" (Musen and Zimbardo 1991).

[8] Community research is a model that employs participatory methods where the community collaborates in the design, data collection, dissemination, and implementation of research (Serrano-Garcia 1990).

[9] "Critical subjectivity" is a type of validity that "rests on a collaborative encounter with experience" (Reason 1994, p. 327). It requires highly critical, self-aware, discriminating, and informed judgments of the co-researchers (Reason and Rowan 1981). "Critical subjectivity means that we do not suppress our primary subjective experience, that we accept that our knowing is from a perspective; it also means that we are aware of that perspective and of its bias, and we articulate it in our communications" (Reason 1994, p. 327).

Others will be uncomfortable with the dual role of researcher/policy influencer (see Garvin and Lee 2003). Unlike traditional researchers, researchers engaged in participatory research are encouraged to take a stand and to be invested in outcomes and policy implementation. They are allied with marginalized individuals and communities with the purpose of improving their well-being and social conditions to the degree possible.

Participatory Action Research (PAR), one of the most widely used of the participatory research models, has the aim of producing knowledge and action directly useful to a marginalized individuals and communities through research, education, and sociopolitical action. Another aim is to “empower people through the process of constructing and using their own knowledge” (Reason 1994, p. 328). All participants work collaboratively with the researcher at all stages of the project—identifying a research topic that they feel is important and relevant, creating research designs, developing methods of recruitment, taking part in data collection and analysis, and deciding how the findings should be used and disseminated.

The ethic of empowerment, embodied by PAR, is the polar opposite of the deficit/pathology paradigm of most criminological research. The process requires researchers to abdicate much of their control and to share power with participants who are regarded not as subjects but co-researchers. Researchers must recognize the limits of their own experience and acknowledge that participants are experts of their own experience. At the same time, such research has the potential of being far more rewarding and consequential for all participants than traditional research. PAR has been used by community psychologists, social workers, and critical sociologists with psychiatric consumers/survivors to evaluate self-help organizations (Nelson et al. 1998); Alaska Natives to explore resiliency and sobriety from a culturally anchored perspective (Mohatt et al. 2004); inner city homeless women for the purpose of empowering them through writing (Paradis 2000); female prisoners to evaluate the impact of college (Fine and Torre 2006); and focus groups of battered women in Japan culminating in the development of a support group (Yoshihama 2002).

There are special safety and ethical considerations that would need to be taken into account when criminologists engage in PAR. For example, safety is always a concern for many marginalized communities, particularly those who have been victimized. In the case of battered women, any public action may be dangerous and should be very carefully considered beforehand. Criminologists would also have to shift their orientation considerably to engage in research that has as its central goal the empowerment of oppressed and marginalized individuals and communities. In traditional criminological research, research participants are often regarded as deviant, unethical, or simply downtrodden (if not by the researcher, then by society).

Since it is the role of the PAR researcher to side with oppressed individuals and communities, questions will arise when determining which groups are “oppressed.” In criminological research this may be more complicated than it seems when you consider the fact that the majority of offenders in the criminal justice system occupy contradictory and complex positions of power and oppression—both as victims and offenders due to their own histories of victimization, racism and poverty. Given such blurred lines, criminologists would have to carefully consider appropriate populations for PAR.

It will be easier to determine which groups are more marginalized relative to others (as in the case of a chronically polluting corporation and the surrounding low-income community affected by its toxic waste). On the other hand, certain groups may not fit most peoples’ definition of an oppressed group because of the heinous nature of their criminal offending, even though they may in fact be powerless to a certain degree in some

circumstances. For example, convicted sex offenders make up a fairly marginalized community given the stigma and ongoing restrictions they experience. Even so, such controversial research populations can pose significant ethical dilemmas for a researcher utilizing PAR.

I can, however, envision many marginalized individuals and communities ideally suited for criminological research utilizing PAR—battered women with special needs (disabled, drug-involved, HIV positive) who are denied services, live in neighborhoods harmed by chronically polluting companies, workers at needle exchange programs seeking to improve relations with the police and the surrounding community, members of an inner city community seeking to open a restorative justice center to address petty crimes of juveniles so as to avoid the criminalization of their youth. Thus, PAR could be used with marginalized communities who are harmed not just by crime, but also by the criminalization process and wide-reaching negative consequences of many criminal justice interventions.

There is a growing societal trend in favor of community-based solutions to crime and delinquency including restorative justice programs, community justice centers, and harm reduction programs (Berman and Feinblatt 2001; Feinblatt and Berman 2001; Kurki 1999; Umbreit and Greenwood 1999). For critical and peacemaking criminologists who feel that the criminal justice system has taken on too much responsibility for addressing social ills that would be better addressed through alternative means and by the communities most directly affected, PAR offers the possibility of putting their theory into practice (see Braithewaite 1989; Pepinsky and Quinney 1991; Tunnell 1995; Zehr 1990).

Since PAR is ultimately about producing knowledge and action directly useful to research participants in their own communities, "action" can include anything from community education to political activism to setting up needed services. Thus, PAR represents a shift away from a total reliance on the criminal justice system for addressing crime and delinquency.

This symbolic break from the criminal justice system is very significant given the powerful historic ties between mainstream criminologists and criminal justice agencies. While there is a sturdy theoretically-based branch in the criminology family tree dating back to the Chicago School, starting in 1915, practitioner-academics also laid claim to the term "criminology" which came to include research useful to criminal justice agencies in combating crime (Moran 1995). Even today, much criminological research takes the form of applied research aimed at assisting criminal justice agencies with crime detection, prevention, and control. Having said this, applied criminological research is not inherently problematic. The idea that research should be useful is a guiding principle of PAR. However, PAR differs from traditional criminological research by placing communities most directly affected by crime in the central role of clarifying their own problems and acting to resolve them instead of relying almost exclusively on experts for answers and the criminal justice system for putting solutions into place.

While PAR offers the exciting possibility of expanding research beyond its traditional boundaries, this paradigm shift is demanding for the researcher. It is considerably more time-consuming than traditional research because participants are actively engaged in all stages of research. This approach may also be more costly than more orthodox methods because co-researchers must be adequately compensated. A one-time fee for participants is not sufficient when their collaboration extends far beyond the data collection process. Participants who help design and implement research should be treated as research assistants and compensated as such.

This collaborative model has significant implications for researchers seeking tenure or promotion because publishing, at least in the traditional academic arena, is no longer the

primary goal, although it is an important outcome of the project. Studies adopting participatory research models generally take longer to complete than more orthodox research projects, making publishing in a timely manner more difficult, potentially impacting the ability of junior faculty to obtain tenure. If the academy wishes to encourage more participatory research projects, it must find ways to reward young researchers engaged in PAR, given its direct impact on marginalized populations.

A final note has to do with authorship of written materials. As the ACJS code of ethics outlines, it is normative to acknowledge all contributors except when to do so would be harmful to them. In a collaborative research model, many more people are actively engaged in the design and implementation of a project than is the case with traditional research. The academic engaged in PAR would conceivably find his/her name diluted by a long list of other co-authors. In a world where authorship—preferably primary authorship with very few additional authors—is highly prized and needed for career advancement, sharing authorship with so many co-researchers may present a problem for the young academic. Again, the social value of such research should be taken into account when evaluating the scholarly contribution of scholars engaged in PAR.

Conclusion

Some criminologists feel that there has been an overemphasis on the criminality and victimization of the poor and that we must turn our attention to the crimes of the powerful (see Chambliss 1975; Reiman 2006). I agree that it is crucial to shatter the stereotype that crime is the exclusive work of the lower-classes. On the other hand, as the left-realists claim, violence, crime, and injustice are major problems for socially and economically disenfranchised communities (Currie 1998; Young and Matthews 1991). Consistent with the latter perspective, I would argue that it is vitally important to chronicle the suffering and inequality of marginalized populations. The absence of narratives of human suffering among the oppressed can "paralyze human action" since such accounts at least offer the possibility of responding to misery and injustice (Kleinman and Kleinman 1996). Having said that, the way we conduct research with members of marginalized communities can serve to empower or further alienate them.

Research participants may understandably feel used when researchers come into their communities, gather data about them, and then leave as soon as they have gathered the information they need for their projects. I sincerely hope that my research participants did not feel this way about our interactions (in fact, many of the women told me that they felt relieved from having told their stories and that the process was cathartic). Nonetheless, I regret that I did not have sufficient knowledge or training to use more participatory approaches at the time.

As I reflect on my research with low-income African-American battered women through a new lens, I see that the experience could have been far more empowering and consequential for the participants and for me. Although qualitative studies like mine are arguably an improvement over most traditional quantitative research because they provide a vehicle for participants to tell their story in their own words and can convey complex and even contradictory descriptions of resilience, strength and suffering (Kleinman and Kleinman 1996); they are not necessarily more empowering unless participants are actively engaged in the research process and can benefit from its outcome.

There are several things I would do differently now. Instead of going into the community with a set research design, I would hold informational sessions with survivors of

domestic violence and their advocates to explain the principles of PAR and to discuss whether such a project could benefit them. As I developed relationships with women over time, I would hope that a core group of interested participants would emerge. This working group would actively take part in research and community action. People who were interested in the project but had less time to commit could serve as "community consultants" and would be invited to regular community meetings to be updated on the project and to provide their input.

My role as the primary researcher would be to provide training and supervise participants when necessary, but otherwise to collaborate with the work group. Participants of the work group could take part in any and all stages of research and community action and would be compensated as if they were research assistants.

Their tasks could include everything from designing interview questionnaires, conducting interviews, writing journal entries, doing field research, analyzing data, and writing up the data.

I realize that truly sharing the data analysis and writing process with members of marginalized communities who often lack higher education and formal training in research methods can be challenging and time consuming. On the other hand, such tensions can also provide opportunities to talk openly about these imbalances of power and explore creative solutions. Fine and Torre (2006) eloquently describe some of the challenges and rewards of using PAR within a women's prison to evaluate college programs. To illustrate, in the name of preserving the confidentiality of prisoners who had been interviewed for the study, researchers had decided that the coded interviews should not be analyzed by the prisoners who had interviewed them. When the prisoners called attention to what they saw as an unfair division of labor—prisoners doing the interviews and outside researchers conducting the data analysis—a new round of discussions on "power, process and democracy ensued" (Fine and Torres 2006, p. 262). The dialog resulted in the decision to provide prisoners temporary access to the data so they could take part in the data analysis process.

PAR would first and foremost produce written materials which could be directed at various audiences, depending on the goals of the work group. As the academically trained researcher, I would probably take the lead in writing any academic papers but always with the consultation of members of the work group. In addition to academic papers and talks, research outcomes could include articles in the popular media, public hearings/meetings, visual art, theatre, poetry, and spoken word. The work group, with the help of community consultants, would decide what other community actions to take. For example, participants could educate their community about domestic violence using a variety of media (e.g., open microphones, community forums, letters to the editor); form a support group for battered women with multiple needs; or lobby for more shelter space and services for women with concurrent problems including histories of addiction, trauma, and HIV. Unlike traditional research, my involvement would not end until all of the work group's objectives had been met. At the very end of the project, a final meeting would be held to discuss the project, focusing on its impact on participants and their community.

My hope is that criminologists will follow the lead of other social scientists and recognize that our role as researchers, particularly in marginalized communities, should extend beyond data collection and that the outcome of research should not be limited to publishing academic papers. I am not claiming that PAR is the best method for all types of criminological research, but simply an exciting approach when working with marginalized groups and their communities. At the very least, let's have a dialogue about the social value of criminological research and the obligations we have to research participants beyond simply doing no harm.

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