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Abstract

In the Australia, Canada, parts of Europe, and the United Kingdom, the provision of sport has had a long tradition of reliance on volunteers. However, there has been increasing pressure for voluntary sport organizations (VSOs) to adopt more “professional” practices and operational procedures. Consequently, there is a tendency for volunteer organizations to adopt approaches to management developed in other industry contexts without giving proper thought to the differences in character of the public, private, and volunteer sector. It is in situations such as this that inappropriate practices are adopted and conflict emerges. Despite this, there has been limited research into conflict in volunteer sport organizations in the UK.

The results of the study demonstrated that relationship conflict was related to both organizational commitment and satisfaction; however, task conflict was only related to job satisfaction. Perhaps the more important finding is the absence of a relationship between task conflict and organizational commitment. It is possible that individuals in VSOs saw their commitment to something greater than the club or association (i.e. the sport or some idealist notion of sport) and were therefore likely to ‘put up’ with high levels of dissatisfaction associated with poor management processes.

Key Words: volunteer management.
In the Australia, Canada, parts of Europe, and the United Kingdom, the provision of sport has had a long tradition of reliance on volunteers. However, following relatively poor international performances and various health and active lifestyle concerns, there has been increasing pressure for voluntary sport organizations (VSOs) to adopt more "professional" practices and operational procedures. Consequently, many organizations have adopted more formalized structures such as employing staff. However, these changes have not occurred smoothly and without conflict.

Whitson and MacIntosh (1988) argue that the professionalization of sport ignores what VSOs are about:

*We acknowledge that from the standpoint of accomplishing presupposed system goals ...the professionalization of these sport organizations can be seen as rational and indeed necessary... However this analysis, while appropriate to the central questions of organizational theory, does not address... other visions of what sport is about.* (p. 92).

This occurs because there is a tendency for volunteer organizations to adopt approaches to management developed in for-profit contexts without giving, "...adequate thought to the differences in organizational missions, characters and culture" (Jeavons, 1993, p. 53). Furthermore, many people in VSOs have no experience of business management and instead rely on popular press or out-dated management ideas. This makes it difficult for VSOs to recognize elements of business management that are relevant to VSO management. What further clouds the situation is that the public and private sector organizations, who interact with sporting organizations, have a tendency to view practices, evaluate programmes, and offer advice from the perspective of their own organizational practices and experiences, which are often far removed from the values and expectations of the members of VSOs (Paton & Cornforth, 1991). For example, Sport England uses funding to exert pressure on VSOs to adopt various organizational structures and operating methods, which they would not ordinarily adopt (Garrett, 2004; Nichols; Gratton, Shibli, & Taylor, 1998). It is in operating environments such as this that conflict emerges (Katz & Kahn, 1978) and consequently with these pressures it is no wonder that sporting organizations are prone to conflict. Despite the importance that authors attach to managing conflict within an organization (see Robbins, 2003) and the growing body of literature examining the management of volunteer organizations, there has been little emphasis on the discussion of conflict in volunteer sport organizations in the UK (see Burke & Collins, 2000). This paper, therefore, provides a much needed and relatively new insight into organizational conflict in VSOs.

**Organizational Conflict**

According to Katz and Kahn (1978), organizational conflict occurs when "...two [organizational] systems interact in such a way that the actions of one
system... prevent or compel one outcome against the resistance of the other” (p. 613). Conflict can occur between groups, between individuals, or even within an individual. Furthermore, conflict can relate to a broad range of situations, such as differences in attitudes, goals, distribution of resources, and competing activities (Schulz, 2005). The literature concerning the various types or sources of conflict is potentially confusing, because it is characterized by a diversity of definitions and models of conflict. In the popular press (see Falconer, 2004) up to six types of organizational conflict are identified. However, in the research literature there is general acceptance for two types of conflict – relationship and task conflict (Jehn, 1995). Relationship conflict concerns interpersonal animosities and tensions between individuals, and occurs because members of organizations come with a diverse range of backgrounds, perceptions, values, roles, beliefs, cultures, attitudes, opinions, needs, goals, expectations, and behaviors. Task conflict concerns disagreements over the way tasks are carried out or arranged, and revolves around the division of work among individuals in an organization and the co-ordination of the activities towards organization’s goals and objectives.

Numerous studies have investigated the relationship between the different types of conflict and various organizational outcomes (see Medina, Dorado, Munduate, Martinez, & Cisneros, 2002; and, Guerra, Martinez, Munduate, & Medina, 2005). Relationship conflict appears to be associated with negative emotional reactions such as anxiety, fear, mistrust, and resentment (Jehn, 1995). Furthermore, high levels of relationship conflict can lead to dysfunctions in the organization and raise levels of stress (Friedman, Tidd, Currall, & Tsai, 2000). Conversely, task conflict is often perceived as being beneficial as it is related to better quality ideas (Amason, 1996); increased debate over issues (Jehn et al. 1999); and that it facilitates a more effective use of resources (Tjosvold, Dann, & Wong, 1992). The underlying thought appears to be that conflict tends to be beneficial, so long as it functions to encourage the airing of ideas, the examination of different solutions or involvement in decision-making. When conflict escalates to the point when it prevents these processes from occurring, it becomes dysfunctional and reduces performance within the organization (Wall & Nolan, 1986).

Two variables that have become particularly important in the study of organizational conflict are organizational commitment and job satisfaction. Organizational commitment is defined as a “strong belief in the organization’s goals and values, a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization, and a strong desire to remain a member of the organization” (Glisson & Durick, 1988, p. 64; see also Mowday, Porter, & Steers 1982). Job satisfaction is usually defined as the positive emotional state resulting from a self-appraisal of an individual’s working environment (Locke 1976; Robbins, 2003). Organizational commitment and job satisfaction are important because they have, in turn been associated with other positive organizational out-
comes. For example, individuals who are more satisfied with their jobs are less likely to leave and less likely to be absent; similarly, individuals who are more committed are more likely to perform well, behave prosocially and less likely to leave (Kirkman & Shapiro, 2001).

The links between the various types of conflict and job satisfaction appear quite clear. Medina et al. (2002) argue that relationship conflict is usually negatively associated with affective states such as job satisfaction, whilst task conflict was not. Similarly, De Dreu and Weingart (2003) in their meta-analysis suggest that relationship conflict affects an individual’s satisfaction more than task conflict when it comes to job satisfaction. The consensus appears to be that relationship conflict elicits a strong negative affective response that is more likely to affect absenteeism and turnover than task conflicts. However, the links between conflict and organization commitment appear to be mixed. Research by Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale (1999) suggest organization commitment is adversely affected by relationship conflict. However, other research (Medina et al. 2002) suggests that organizational commitment is only affected when there are high levels of both relationship and task conflict present. To date, the mixed and sometimes contradictory results are usually attributed to type of organization studied and most authors (see Guerra et al., 2005) agree that the context and industry of the organization plays an important part in the impact of conflict.

Research into organizational conflict, commitment and job satisfaction in the VSO literature

While conflict has been studied relatively exhaustively within the public and private sectors when it comes to sport organizations there has been limited research. This creates problems for managers in VSOs. Firstly, there is limited understanding of how the various types of conflict within VSOs manifest and secondly there is little knowledge of how conflict is related to other organizational processes (such as organizational commitment and job satisfaction). This next section provides a brief overview of the conflict related research that has been undertaken in VSOs.

Amis et al. (1995) investigated, from a sociological perspective, the nature of the conflict that affected sporting organizations. They based their analyses on interviews of members of Canadian sport organizations that had been involved in significant conflict, and from these interviews, four case studies were formed. Their findings suggested that conflict was not just interpersonal but arose due to the organizational design or structural arrangements. In all of their case studies structure conflict was directly related to the degree that sub-units within the organizations were differentiated and interdependent. These differences included spatial differences, technical and administrative dif-
ferences, and volunteer/professional disparities. However, they also argued that the design arrangements also created a paradox for managers. It was possible to create structures that effectively accomplished organizational goals, but the same structures often gave rise to conflict, which then affected the attainment of the organizational goals. The researchers also noted two additional design arrangements - resource scarcity and the ambiguity associated with various administrative procedures had the potential to escalate organizational conflict. However, this becomes problematic as these two processes are often out of the control of the VSO.

Verhoeven, Laporte, De Knop, Bollaert, Taks, and Vincke (1999) also studied organizational conflict from a sociological perspective. They carried out in-depth interviews with 25 volunteers from Flemish sport federations and sport clubs, with the aim to help managers in VSOs to understand the broader and underlying sources of conflict. Their research had three main findings. Firstly, the pressure being placed on volunteers and VSOs by increasing government regulations and communication. Secondly a lack of communication, loyalty, rewards and power amongst the various members and stakeholders. Finally, the increasing lack of fit between the skills and tasks needed to run a VSO and the profile of the volunteer. Furthermore, they were concerned that the long-term effect of conflict may have an effect on the retention of volunteers, without which the current sporting infrastructure would collapse. Therefore, they suggested that it was important to develop strategies to manage conflict in VSOs effectively.

Burke and Collins (2000) paper provides a good theoretical discussion of the place of conflict in the management of VSOs. Like Amis et al. (1995) and Verhoeven et al. (1999), they argued that conflict is endemic to sporting organizations. The “pressure to meet performance targets, lack of resources, change, power differences or social and cultural factors may give rise to conflict, and managers are often required to intervene” (p. 45). Unlike the previous studies they acknowledged that some conflict could be beneficial if managed correctly, however, they also highlighted that there was little or no data available to assist VSOs in the management of conflict. The second half of their work involved interviews with managers to identify key factors in the handling of conflict. Similar to previous studies they discovered that individual differences and structural issues to be important types or sources of conflict. Secondly they noticed that managers used a variety of strategic (e.g. lobbying) and tactical skills (timing of intervention) to handle conflict. Different situations and different types of conflict called for different or mixed approaches to management.

Schulz (2005) adopted a social psychological approach and focused on the effects of conflict on individuals within VSOs. In particular, he explored through a series of semi-structured interviews, the differences in opinion between paid and voluntary staff within VSOs; and whether these differences
helped or hindered the management of their organizations. The main outcome of the research was that volunteers and paid staff held quite different and potentially conflicting opinions of key management practices in three interrelated areas: (1) the mission of the organization, (2) the motivation behind an individual’s involvement in the organization and (3) the adoption of management practices. It is these management practices and the conflicts they cause which affected paid and voluntary staff. Schulz suggested the differences stemmed from a lack of understanding of “the nature of volunteers and VSOs and consequently the adoption of inadequately developed management models and practices” (p. 51).

Schulz and Auld (2006) researched the ambiguity amongst roles within VSOs. Role ambiguity is often partnered with role conflict as part of role stress (Katz and Kahn, 1978) and is therefore included in this review. Specifically, the study examined the relationships between role ambiguity and organizational design, communication, job satisfaction, and tenure. A major finding was the relationship between role ambiguity and job satisfaction. They concluded that role ambiguity tends to be associated with “negatively valued states such as tension, low satisfaction, and poor job performance” (p. 186). However similar to Amis et al. (1994), they identified a paradox for managers. They concluded that strategies used to encourage initial involvement often conflict with strategies adopted for encouraging long-term participation. This was in line with Agarwal (1999), who argued that formalization may support initial introduction to organizational operations by reducing role ambiguity however, it may also prevent individuals from drawing on their expertise and experience thereby creating dilemmas and stress for more experienced staff or in the case of VSOs, volunteers.

Whilst this next article is not specifically about conflict, it is included here because of the present study’s focus on the relationship between conflict and organizational commitment. Cuskelly, Boag, and McIntyre (1999) were particularly interested in the differences in the organizational commitment of paid staff and volunteers, and how this affects the way they relate to VSOs. They adopted the organizational commitment model of Meyer and Allen (1991) which measures three aspects of organizational commitment (continuance, affective, and normative commitment). Although the levels of organizational commitment in the study varied in both nature and intensity, the variation was “to the point where it is possible that the organizational commitment experienced by paid staff and volunteers in sport organizations is fundamentally different along several dimensions” (p. 59). For example, paid staff reported higher levels of continuance commitment. This was not unexpected; because of the employment obligations of the staff member to the club, they are able to leave in uncertain employee markets. These findings reinforce the view that the various organizational structures and processes can lead to tension be-
tween paid staff and volunteers (Pearce, 1993), which may be a source of conflict and therefore influence commitment.

The aim of this study was to extend the work of these researchers by examining the relationship between the different types of conflict and various organizational outcomes (specifically organizational commitment and job satisfaction) in VSOs. This is the first stage of developing informed conflict management practices for VSOs.

**Methods**

The study was undertaken in two stages. The first stage used an online questionnaire sent to the volunteer committee members of basketball clubs that played in England basketball’s southern league (Solent, Bucks & Oxon, Wessex, Guernsey, & Jersey). Each organization’s email address was taken from the region's directory (UK Basketball Southern Region, 2007) providing a sample of 70 participants. Participants were invited to the study by an email that contained a link to the questionnaire (hosted by www.surveymonkey.com). A follow-up email was sent 7 days later to (a) say thank you to those who had taken part in the online questionnaire or to (b) prompt those who had not responded. The use of an online questionnaire for answering was advantageous as emails were quicker to distribute, the information provided by participants was more manageable for analysis, and all of the clubs and committee members had access to email as part of their role. A total of 49 individuals responded to the online questionnaire, giving a response rate of 70%. The second stage of the study was a series of semi-structures interviews, that followed up issues identified in the statistical analysis of the questionnaires. Elements from these interviews are used in the discussion to help clarify aspects of the findings.

The questionnaire comprised of three sections. The first section measured the levels of conflict within the VSO. Relationship conflict comprised of eight items from the conflict scale developed by De Dreu and Van Vianen (2001). Task conflict was taken from the scale developed by Friedman et al. (2000), which also comprised eight statements. The second section of the questionnaire measured the level of organizational commitment and job satisfaction. The organizational commitment measure was the short form (nine items) of the scale developed by Cuskelly (1996). A single global rating of job satisfaction, as suggested by Robbins (2003), was considered appropriate for this research. All statements for sections on conflict, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction were anchored on 5 point Likert-type scales, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree), to 5 (strongly agree). The higher the score, the more the participants agreed with the statements. The third section of the questionnaire
gathered socio-demographic details such as gender, job title, age, and tenure. The questionnaire was piloted for accuracy and ease of understanding. Feedback from the pilot tests meant several minor alterations were carried out.

The questionnaire data was analyzed using SPSS version 16. Cronbach Alphas were calculated to examine the internal reliability of each of the scales used in the study. Descriptive statistics were used to provide an overview of conflict and the participants. Pearson’s Product Moment Correlation analyses were undertaken to identify relationships between the types of conflict, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction.

Results

Descriptive statistics

The ages of the participants ranged from 18 years of age to 66 years old (M = 31.810; SD = 14.657) and the tenure of participants in the voluntary sport organizations ranged from one to 30 years (M = 6.310; SD = 7.755). Cronbach Alpha for each of the scales were moderately high (relationship conflict, α = .770; task conflict, α = .769; and organizational commitment, α = .895) and therefore considered suitable for analysis (Kline, 2000). Individuals reported moderate levels of relationship conflict (M = 3.452; SD = 0.557) and task conflict (M = 3.243; SD = 0.557). There were slightly higher levels of organizational commitment (M = 3.964; SD = 0.633) and of job satisfaction (M = 3.786; SD = 1.116) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for major variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational commitment</th>
<th>α</th>
<th>Mean (M)</th>
<th>Std. Deviation (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>n/a*</td>
<td>31.810</td>
<td>14.657</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenure (years)</td>
<td>n/a*</td>
<td>6.310</td>
<td>7.755</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship conflict**</td>
<td>.770</td>
<td>3.452</td>
<td>0.557</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task conflict**</td>
<td>.769</td>
<td>3.243</td>
<td>0.727</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational commitment**</td>
<td>.895</td>
<td>3.964</td>
<td>0.633</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job satisfaction**</td>
<td>n/a*</td>
<td>3.786</td>
<td>1.116</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* n/a = not applicable
** Measured on a 5 point Likert-type scale.
A high score represents a high level of the construct.
Relationships between variables

The results of the correlation analyses demonstrated that there were negative relationships between relationship conflict and both (a) organizational commitment ($r = -0.326; p < 0.033$) and (b) job satisfaction ($r = -0.471; p < 0.002$). This means we would expect to find low levels of organizational commitment and job satisfaction in organizations with high levels of relationship conflict. Secondly, the correlation analyses revealed that task conflict was not statistically related to organizational commitment ($r = -0.13p < p < 0.403$). However there was a negative relationship between task conflict and job satisfaction ($r = -0.434; p < 0.004$). This suggested we would expect to find low levels of job satisfaction in organizations with high levels of task conflict. However, organizational commitment would be unaffected. Finally, the correlation analyses demonstrated that the two conflict measures were related ($r = .650, p < 0.000$), however organizational commitment was not statistically related to job satisfaction ($r = .193, p < 0.220$) (see Table 2).

Table 2. Correlations between the types of conflict and organizational commitment and job satisfaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Organizational commitment</th>
<th>Job satisfaction</th>
<th>Relationship conflict</th>
<th>Task conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship conflict</td>
<td>-0.326</td>
<td>-0.471</td>
<td>.650</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$p &lt; 0.333$</td>
<td>$p &lt; 0.002$</td>
<td>$p &lt; 0.000^*$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task Conflict</td>
<td>-0.130</td>
<td>-0.434</td>
<td>.650</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$p &lt; 0.405$</td>
<td>$p &lt; 0.004^*$</td>
<td>$p &lt; 0.000^*$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational commitment</td>
<td>.193</td>
<td>$p &lt; 0.220$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job satisfaction</td>
<td>.193</td>
<td>$p &lt; 0.220$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significant at the 0.05 level.

Discussion

Previous studies of conflict in VSOs have focused on different aspects of conflict for example structural antecedents (Amis et al. 1995), pressures (Verhoeven et al. 1999), differences in perceptions (Schulz, 2005), and role ambiguity (Schulz & Auld, 2006). The present study builds on these concepts by
examining the relationship between the various types of organizational conflict (relationship & task) and two organizational outcomes (organizational commitment & job satisfaction). In summary, relationship conflict was negatively related to organizational commitment and job satisfaction; and, task conflict was negatively related to job satisfaction but was not related to organizational commitment.

Similarly to other studies of VSOs, conflict arising from personal differences and relationships was a major source of conflict in the basketball clubs under study. The nature of a VSO means that people come from different backgrounds and that individuals are always going to have different personalities, different coping strategies, and different goals; and this is likely to cause problems. For instance, one volunteer commented, “you are forced to work with people who you wouldn’t normally choose to be with” [Participant C]. However, there appeared to be benefits from having an organizational membership that was relatively friendly and social as it promoted communication. For example, Participant C also said, “you get great communication with that person if you have the friendship”. This is potential an area of concern as funding bodies such as Sport England or government departments are increasingly using VSOs as mechanisms to meet their social inclusion targets (Garrett, 2004; Nichols et al., 1998) and consequently, to receive funding VSOs are required to increase the diversity and ethnic make-up of the organization which could lead to increased relationship conflict. In this study relationship conflict was negatively related to both commitment and satisfaction, and therefore was the area most likely to have adverse effects on retention. As mentioned earlier, organizational commitment and job satisfaction are linked to absenteeism and turnover (Kirkman & Shapiro, 2001). Relationship conflict tends to be more interpersonal and emotional and therefore more likely to elicit a negative affective response (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003).

Managing relationship conflict is problematic as VSO committees rarely have the ability to impose the sanctions or disciplinary procedures that are routinely used in the private and public sectors when dealing with this type of conflict (Angelica, 1999; Falconer, 2004). The structural commitments (e.g. wages or employment) that cause a staff member to remain in a role are less strong in VSOs (Cuskeley, et al., 1999) and therefore the use of harsh techniques to manage conflict are likely to exacerbate the situation. This creates a difficult situation for VSOs.

Similar to other research (Amis et al., 1995; & Verhoeven et al., 1999) task conflict was prevalent in the UK basketball clubs in this study. The interviewees remarked that there was generally confusion over the allocation of tasks. This meant some people did less than was expected, others more than expected, and sometimes people did other people’s work. The interviews once again “blamed” the nature of voluntary organizations and suggested, “people
fall into roles rather than through the usual formal recruitment and selection process that would occur in other organizational spheres” [Participant B].

As in previous studies (see De Dreu & Weingart, 2003) task conflict negatively affected job satisfaction. However, what is more interesting is the absence of a relationship between task conflict and organizational commitment. The way the club is structured and managed does not influence an individual’s commitment to the organization. One explanation might be that in VSOs organizational commitment is measuring a person’s attachment to the mission and the overall aims of the sport, rather than the individual club or organization. This would also help explain the negative relationship between task and job satisfaction. VSOs might be poor at organizing and managing the sport but this does not dilute the members’ attachment to what the organization is trying to achieve. It appears that many people believe that the poor management practices are “part and parcel” of voluntary organizations and are prepared to sacrifice their satisfaction for the sake of the sport. This may also be related to the way that outside forces such as the governing bodies of sport control or impose various operating procedures within clubs through financial and affiliation sanctions (Papadimitriou, 1998). Once again, individuals may dislike the structures and this may have an effect on their satisfaction.

An interesting point raised by Reichers (1986) that has not been followed up in the literature is the multiple constituencies approach to organizational commitment. Individuals within organizations frequently pursue multiple, competing sets of ideas and values. In the case of VSOs parents seek playing opportunities for their children, committees seek to establish developmental pathways, government departments seek opportunities for enhance social inclusion and capital, national governing bodies seek elite performers. The lack of a relationship between the task conflict and organizational commitment may be confounded by the presence of multiple sets of commitments, within the local club.

A practical outcome from the present study would be steps for the improvement of conflict management in the organizational setting. However, what practices and structures are the “correct” ones? There is not a simple solution such as the adoption of more formalized roles and procedures as advocated by governing bodies and sporting bodies (Garret, 2004). “The effective management of conflict is not so much an issue of magnitude as it is an issue of variety... how much conflict a team experiences is of secondary importance to the type of conflict it experiences” (De Dreu, 1997, p. 111). Overall, the study presents conflict as a complex system of conflict types and interactions. In this sense conflict resolution means that there is a need to address relative levels of each type of conflict, rather than concentrating on any one single type of conflict (Jehn & Chatman, 2000).

The present study was conducted with basketball clubs in the UK. Thus, the results presented are probably limited in their generalizability to other vol-
untary sport organizations or organizations that rely on volunteers for much of their management and operational processes. In addition, care should be exercised in interpreting the cross sectional data. Many studies, in addition to the present study, conceptualize variables such as conflict as an antecedent to organization commitment, yet conflict and organizational commitment were measured simultaneously. Both commitment and conflict develops over time and therefore longitudinal data may provide a more accurate picture of the relationship between conflict and commitment.

This study is one of the first studies to explore the relationship between conflict types and organizational commitment and job satisfaction – two outcome variables, in VSOs. The study demonstrated that relationship conflict was related to both organizational commitment and satisfaction; however, task conflict was only related to job satisfaction. Perhaps the more important finding is the absence of a relationship between task conflict and organizational commitment. It is possible individuals in VSOs saw their commitment to something greater than the club or association (i.e. the sport or some idealist notion of sport) and therefore were likely to “put up” with high levels of dissatisfaction. The point to remember is that VSOs are not neutral free instruments of task accomplishment, but rather they are the embodiment of the values and beliefs of the members (Slack & Thiabult, 1988) and therefore an understanding of the way organizational affect members will lead to better management strategies.

References


EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TASK CONFLICT, RELATIONSHIP CONFLICT


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