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Becoming a pilgrim: the lived experience of men becoming therapists following a former career

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Becoming a psychotherapist following a former career can be arduous and uncertain, yet also purposeful and meaningful for those undertaking the challenge. As considerably fewer men than women enter this profession, we thought it interesting to explore men's specific experiences by looking at the lived experience of seven male participants' transition into psychotherapy from a previous career. With the application of van Manen's existential-hermeneutic phenomenological approach, three themes emerged: *Fermenting discontent*, *Pilgrimage as project* and *The ambivalent allure of acceptance*. We briefly describe each with reference to relevant existential concepts, attending in more detail to the final theme. We conclude by discussing the challenges for men making this transition, and how becoming more aware of the experiences of men can be a mechanism for promotion and support in this profession.

Keywords: mid-life career change; becoming a psychotherapist/counsellor; masculinity; men; therapy; phenomenology

Introduction

Changing career challenges our sense of identity, allows us to discover new skills and presents opportunities for novel experiences, promoting excitement and growth. It can also be a daunting, costly and uncertain step into an unpredictable way of being without the safety net of the familiar to rely upon. Depending on the choice of new career, it can have an impact on income, too.[1]

Considerably fewer men than women opt to enter the psychotherapy profession.[2] Curious about the experiences of men taking this path, we sought to explore the lived experience of those for whom this transition is a major career shift.

Research design

This study employs an existential-hermeneutic phenomenological approach (van Manen, 1990). It aims for rich description of phenomena (above any kind of a priori theorizing) while acknowledging the inevitable role of interpretation (Valle & Halling, 1989; van Manen, 1990). Rather than asking why our participants may

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have said something, we explore what might be being revealed implicitly (Finlay, 2011).

Embracing a phenomenological attitude, we attempted to bracket our presuppositions in order to attend, genuinely and actively, to our participants' experience. At the same time, we recognized the inter-subjective nature of the encounter, and the impact of our own subjectivity as researchers on the interpretations being made. Avoiding any claim to being unbiased researchers, we reflexively attended to contextual meanings, including our own personal experiences of making mid-life career changes.

All seven participants replied to an advertisement seeking men who had changed career to become a therapist (counsellor or psychotherapist). All had been over the age of 30 when they transitioned, having experienced at least one main career before that. Their ages ranged from 48 to 71.

The participants viewed this research as an opportunity to further explore their transition. With our ethical concerns foregrounded, they were well briefed, and confidentiality was assured (all names are pseudonyms). Our participants trusted Nigel (first author) to handle their material sensitively and supportively during interviews (all interviews were conducted by Nigel and then transcribed).

During analysis, we followed van Manen's (1990) explicitly non-prescriptive approach, which calls for the researcher to attune deeply to the research question and engage in iterative reflexive analysis. For van Manen (1990, p. 36), phenomenology aims to transform lived experience 'into a textual expression of its essence in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflective re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own experience'. To this end, we engaged Finlay's (2013) processes of *seeing afresh*, *dwelling*, *explicating* and *languaging*, in an attempt to reveal the live, evocative and poetic meanings that might lurk within the phenomenon.

Findings

Three general themes emerged: *A fermenting discontent*, *Pilgrimage as project* and *The ambivalent allure of acceptance.* No one theme is stand-alone, precise or sufficient; each is emergent and partial, and overlaps with the others.

Theme 1: A fermenting discontent

For the participants, the lived experience of becoming a therapist emerges out of a fermenting sense of discontent during the former career. Present dimly in the background, perhaps for a period of years, this is brought sharply into focus during a period of change and uncertainty in the former role.

When applied to the context of participants' work, the discontent is often referred to as *meaninglessness.* Awareness of under-utilized relational and/or creative skills becomes fused with a growing sense of despair and decline in relation to the current way of life. As Patrick put it, 'I'd lost it in my career, not outside of that but definitely in my career I'd lost that sense of purpose. I just felt like I was floundering a bit'.

This frustration does not become definite and clear-cut until work emerges as a possible source. However, at this stage participants remain unclear as to why they are ill at ease and what can be done about it; after all, the former role has served them well and brings benefits in terms of income, status and friendships. The

possibility of being a therapist remains in misty obscurity, hidden from full view, occasionally glimpsed but quickly disappearing again in the haze.

Particular sorts of changes at work – redundancy, for example, or the arrival of new technology – then set things in motion. The changes seem to both stimulate and reveal a sense of self, bringing the participants back to themselves as free, conscious beings who choose what they do. As such, it reveals the truth about the current situation (the experience of fermenting discontent) and the kind of existential guilt described by Heidegger and belonging to *Dasein* (his term for human-being or *being-there*). This guilt harbours a motivation that cannot easily be reduced to words, yet represents a clear summons to act (Heidegger, 2010).

Each participant described an experience in their previous situation which helped crystallize their discomfort and disillusionment, and prompt a desire to evolve. Such episodes were catalytic rather than causal events. Some participants identified emotionally challenging situations, often involving grief or ill health, as contributing to their shift in attitude. Boredom, too, emerged as a feature of the growing discontent. Patrick described his work as no longer

> feeding my soul. I was going to work and … was I unhappy? I worked with a great bunch of people so you know we always had a laugh, we always went out and did stuff together but no, I felt erm … like I wasn't fulfilled anymore. I wanted to do something else, I didn't know what it was … .

Participants' awareness of the benefits brought by their existing career seemed part of the mechanism obscuring other possibilities. As they reflected on this past experience (in some cases for the first time since retraining), the men spoke of a growing awareness of something missing from life, an emptiness they sought to fill without knowing how. This concurs with Heidegger's idea of being summoned by *nothing*:

> The call does not say anything, does not give any information about events of the world, has nothing to tell … . The call is lacking any kind of utterance. It does not even come to words, and yet it is not obscure and indefinite. (Heidegger, 2010, p. 263)

Participants described finding themselves stagnating and absorbed in the demands of their day-to-day life. This period appears to harbour an anxiety born of paradox: within what I know is the answer I seek, yet what I know also blinds me to the truth. While the men continued enjoying the benefits brought by their work, their quest for answers to the growing meaninglessness they felt remained unfulfilled. It's like believing that you have left your keys in a certain place and yet they don't seem to be there; you keep returning to the same place until a certain disorientating impetus jolts you out of your everydayness by illuminating a different option.

This period can be seen to constitute a kind of dwelling with discomfort and meaninglessness reminiscent of Heidegger's existential concept of 'uncanniness' (*Unheimlichkeit*), where the individual experiences a sense of 'not-being-at-home' (Heidegger, 2010, p. 181). For Heidegger, this way of *being-in-the-world* is concealed beneath the cover of unquestioned, taken-for-granted everydayness. We seek to throw ourselves into a tranquillized at-home world of day-to-day chores and *they-roles* (2010, p. 181). But if we expose the illusion of our taken-for-granted world and face our existential anxiety (attunement to angst) and finitude, we can grasp an

authentic potentiality-for-being. Heidegger is referring here to a kind of listening that one can only do for oneself, one that interrupts the normal everyday voice of the *they.* 'Dasein fails to hear itself, and listens to the *they*, and this listening gets broken by the call … which … has a character in every way opposite' (Heidegger, 2010, p. 261).

For participants, their experience of changing career to become a therapist seemed to involve a glacier-like movement away from *they-roles* towards an *uncanny*, more conscious and tentative way of being. The *call* (Heidegger, 2010) emerges for the men amidst the misty discontent. It is simultaneously both certain and unknown/unknowable.

For Richard, a personal encounter with therapy opened up a different view of himself and the world:

> My father passed on so I kind of had a taster of what counselling was. Somebody helped me a great deal with counselling, so here was an opportunity in my mind in the mid-90s. Here was something that I might want to do.

Richard's sense of emotional distress exposed him to a new vista. For Richard and other participants, this seemed to be associated with their softer, relational skills.

In Kierkegaard's terminology, Richard and the others seemed to be shifting from the pole of the *finite*, the necessary where they carried out a day-to-day existence, to the opposite pole, of the *infinite*, where possibility and uncertainty merge with freedom and responsibility (Kierkegaard, 2008).

Participants were moving away from a space that no longer nourished them existentially towards a radically different and uncertain future. Together with the other two themes, this aspect of their lived experience sets the backdrop for a loss of meaning and a quest to replace it. In doing so, it generates confusion and uncertainty as well as possibility and wonder.

Theme 2: Pilgrimage as project

This theme reflects the forward momentum exercised by the participants towards a more conscious if less certain existence, one that holds hope for a richer, more purposeful life. It seeks to capture the paradoxical coexistence of strangeness and familiarity within the participants. Just as pilgrims purposefully leave home and find a new home in their homelessness, participants elect to enter a new landscape, one that York (2001, p. 148) calls 'homescapes': 'places where we feel an inner rootedness, where we know intuitively that even if we are in a strange, wild and faraway place, we are home'.

For participants, the idea of becoming a therapist emerges from a vision of life projected into their future. Their pilgrimage rests on their sense of 'lostness': an awareness of what has been missing in the past. Many individuals experience a similar sense of dissatisfaction at some point in their life or career, but address it in a multitude of other ways, including different forms of avoidance. The pilgrimage, as we describe it here, represents tentative steps towards uncertainty and meaning. It becomes a way of being that is in itself a project.

The word 'pilgrim' derives from the Latin *peregrinus*, a foreigner or one from abroad. Although pilgrims often have a religiously significant endpoint, whether Jerusalem, Canterbury or Mecca, it can be argued that the pilgrimage is its own end-goal. In the case of the participants, the quest and end-goal constitute a way of being that is

simultaneously *away from* home and *at* home. Energized by desire, it involves struggle and determination; it is perceived as uncertain and risky, yet is sustained by a vision of possibility and truth.

Neil describes his experience:

> It was just before I was 50 and by that stage I was into my counselling training, and I do think there was something for me around age, around that transition from that earlier stage – being a home parent, all that illness and stuff, but also something about me wanting to say 'No, I've got something else here, I've got something more I want to do' … I think that there was something there which was pushing me, nudging me into a new direction, to do something different.

Here, Neil tells of the silent, powerful energy that motivated him towards change. Describing the energy as 'pushing me, nudging me' suggests a certain resistance on his part, and a sense of the movement arising from behind him; hence the use of the verb 'push'. What lies behind us is our temporality. Our 'facticity' (Heidegger, 2010, p. 56) anchors us to a sense of what cannot be undone and therefore becomes the launch pad as we *project* ourselves into the possibilities of our future and a fuller unfolding of our wholeness towards completion in death.

Mike's vision of new possibilities came about thus:

> I started thinking about what else I might be able to do, given my skills and attributes, and the vision was to be sitting in a private consulting room seeing a manageable number of monied clients every day, and just sort of living a fairly comfortable, home-based life.

The dawning of this vision was often gradual, although Pete and Patrick both described experiencing a sudden moment of clarity. For most, the familiar had begun to feel increasingly unfamiliar as their dissatisfaction was revealed to them. The old home feels 'uncanny' (Heidegger, 2010, p. 181), and discloses a desire to return to a home that seemingly no longer exists. Perhaps the men were experiencing a 'call out of uncanniness' (Heidegger, 2010, p. 269), a preliminary step towards a mode of authentic living.

Relevant here is Heidegger's concept of *Langweile*, defined as a fundamental mood or attunement that reveals something essential to ourselves about our existence. Moments of profound boredom can reveal us to ourselves as 'thrown' (Heidegger, 2010, p. 135), and push us to find new, more authentic ways of projecting ourselves, even if we just end up finding new ways of 'falling prey' (2010, p. 169). In contrast, *Dasein* is aware of its possibilities and *facticity*; it is the ever-present mode of being upon which we *project* ourselves forward. For the participants, this mode of being undergoes a shift away from normal everydayness and the 'they' (2010, p. 111) towards a new, uncanny and deliberate existence: *the pilgrimage*, a position where they are now 'not-being-at-home' (2010, p. 183).

The position of *not-being-at-home*, uncertainty and confusion is not a passive acceptance of one's lost self. It is not a reluctance or withdrawal from self and society, as in some forms of depression. It is quite the opposite: a powerful conviction that a state of coherence is there to be found, and must be found. With the realization of *not-being-at-home*, participants become pilgrims who leave something in order to find something else: a return to coherence and meaning. Paradoxically, the understanding of one's *not-being-at-home* is at the same time a return home, even if that home is still lost.

The state of homelessness in which the pilgrim exists can be accompanied by anxiety. To the participants, it seems that the future they are discovering and exploring is one they find themselves in, rather than actively choose. They have not left home; rather, home has left them. Interestingly, in the original German, Heidegger seems to suggest that the sense of anxiety is experienced as if it were given. As Mugeraurer (2008, p. 56) notes, 'We find ourselves caught up in anxiety, in dread … The German says "es ist einem unheimlich". Here the use of the dative "einem" directionally emphasises that the uncanny, the experience of the dis-ease, befalls or is given to one'.

On their journey from what once felt like home to a new one, participants describe finding themselves in a strange land, hovering between an anxious not-knowing and a hopeful becoming. This juxtaposition emerges as a new *being-at-home* (Heidegger, 2010), one in which growth and discovery sit alongside determination and struggle.

For Jack, this journey was filled with uncertainty and a sense of 'not getting it', and at the same time a strong belief that there was something to 'get' from this process. He sought something that would abolish his feeling of 'something missing'. For other participants, the movement between necessary facts and the infinite choices of how to be a therapist represented a new way of being. A certain faith was required to sustain the forces of uncertainty, anxiety, possibility and acceptance. Faith emerges as the pilgrims pursue a path through their new way of being and its unknown, uncertain and paradoxical territory, challenging their relationship with others and their sense of being seen.

Theme 3: The ambivalent allure of acceptance

This theme addresses participants' powerful desire to be accepted by self and others while wanting to stand out for being special, too. The standing-out-from is a necessary component of being special and belonging, one that paradoxically also includes isolation and marginalization.

Being-seen at a deeper level takes on a higher priority in participants' *lebenswelt* (life world) during their career transition. What they used to do revealed little about who they were in a personal, authentic sense, and in some cases contradicted how they actually felt. Like the flora of a rainforest, there were parts of them that existed in the shade and yearned for the light. The men inch forwards towards the light, enticed by a desire for illumination. Unaccustomed to the full glare, they squint and blink their way to becoming a therapist.

Three intertwined sub-themes emerged within this third general theme: respect and status; authenticity and depth; marginalization and belonging. These thematic phenomena speak to what Heidegger (2010, p. 114) referred to as 'being-with' – an inescapable aspect of *Dasein*. Heidegger emphasizes that *Dasein* has a 'care' for others, and through that *care* the being of *Dasein* is revealed to the world, itself and others:

> This nearest and elemental way of Dasein encountering the world goes so far that even one's own Dasein initially becomes discoverable by looking away from its 'experiences' and the 'center of its actions', or by not yet 'seeing' them at all. Dasein initially finds 'itself' in what it does, needs, expects, has charge of, in the things at hand which it initially takes care of in the surrounding world. (Heidegger, 2010, p. 116)

Within their former work, participants were agents of productivity and/or capital gain. They acted upon the *things-at-hand* within their respective industries. In some cases,

this involved other people, who become seen as resources. The men were defined by, and saw themselves through, this particular lens until change helped them reveal the discontent bubbling away under the surface.

The dramatic shift from one career to another can be seen as a turning-away-from, one that reveals the participants' care for the thing they leave behind and that which they are drawn to. Their care for this thing in turn reveals something essential about this phenomenon. Even things that begin to hurt us can become objects of care or attention: I am careful around a thorn as I hold and admire a rose. But *care* is paradoxical, and the thorn and the rose can be so closely connected that we are repelled and attracted simultaneously.

The first sub-theme, *respect and status*, addresses participants' belief that the therapist commands deference, stands out from others for his/her ability and is somewhat mysterious to non-therapists. This possibility emerged by virtue of its absence in participants' former career. They fantasized about how others might react to encountering someone with the title 'therapist'. As Neil put it:

> I think there was something in me that really was motivated to do something that I could succeed at in terms of society, in terms of the people around me, because I was finding it very difficult as a home parent in that party situation where people say 'What do you do?' – you know, it felt sometimes that I was just fudging it – I do a bit of writing, I look after the kids, it felt very amorphous, it felt very intangible to say what I did.

Various aspects emerged from the interviews. The first was participants' identification with 'another' with whom they had personal contact, or had read about, long before the idea of being a therapist became a possibility. This is in line with the narratives collected by Dryden and Spurling (1989), which include several where therapists cite other therapists or authors with whom they strongly identified.

A second aspect involved considering how others might react to someone with the title of therapist. Here, the fantasy therapist is grouped along with other kinds of therapists, including those with mind-reading (supernatural) skills. Myth and reality merge, so that an individual's reaction when confronted with an actual therapist can lie on a spectrum from incredulity to curiosity. As Pete said, 'This is not only something which is seen as respectable and very professional in Western society; people even feel intimidated when you tell them you're a psychotherapist'. Whatever the reaction, the therapist stands out for what he/she represents to the other: something between fear and wonder. This, at least, is how the yet-to-be therapists imagine their new career. They expect or hope to be seen and respected, to stand out for being different.

In the second sub-theme, *authenticity and depth*, participants discussed their search for rich, authentic relationships, in contrast to the difficult, sometimes despairing ones they had encountered in their former work. Richard spoke thus:

> You began this ludicrous sort of thing every day you met them, They'd meet you at the door like a royal line and you'd shake hands with them like, you know, and you'd be saying 'You bastard' [laughs] forgive me – but it felt like that … and many of us on our side, you know, when you've finished a meeting you just want to go wash your hands, you felt not contaminated, but it felt unpleasant.

Richard's description of needing to wash his hands perhaps speaks to a deeper cleansing that he was seeking to achieve. Unlike his former career, counselling seemed to be

focused on people rather than costing efficiencies and profit. In his former career, Richard described a way of being with others in which his co-workers were seen as costly resources, easily replaced by sophisticated technology. The otherness of the situation was not fully experienced in its truest form: that is, Richard's co-workers were other *Dasein* for whom there exists mutual *care* (Heidegger, 2010). This did not mean that Richard lacked guilt or sadness that people were losing their jobs and livelihoods, but that he learned to distance himself from the experience in a way that made it more acceptable. It was not until Richard had lost his own father and sought counselling that his relationship with the ontological was renewed. As he put it:

> It felt to me that you were doing something for people as individuals, I mean working for a corporation if you like, you know, it's sort of an anonymous sort of thing, and then all of a sudden there was a sense of intimacy.

The anonymous is another name for 'das Man' – or *they* (Heidegger, 2010). Heidegger says that we become anonymous when we lose our authentic being and become *das Man* and do as *they* do. Within large corporations, employees may stop being individuals; they may adopt the corporate language, culture, dress code and so on. In contrast, participants experienced a sense of meaning from the more in-depth connections they made with their counselling clients. Richard presents 'intimacy' as the antithesis of anonymity. It is a truly satisfying aspect of the role, one that affirms certain rare but concrete qualities possessed by the participants long before their career shift.

Therapists were seen as maintaining a depth of intimacy with other persons in a way that was rare in everyday life. As a result, they were seen to be special, as having skills that others seemingly didn't possess.

The third sub-theme, *marginalization and belonging*, expresses participants' active choice of minority status. In their desire to stand-out-from and therefore be special, they embrace exclusion and isolation, too. The marginal position is both desired and rejected, contributing to the sense of uncertainty and anxiety that is a continuing aspect of the pilgrimage.

For the participants, retraining as therapists included the experience of a more feminine work space. Here, certain familiar elements appeared to be absent. Patrick described training as having a predominantly 'female energy', resulting in a lack of 'grittiness'. As a result, he felt unprepared at the end of training to respond to the mainly male client base that requested his help but didn't want to hear softer, less 'gritty' counselling interventions. For Patrick, it was as if the classroom were run by females for females; the assumption seemed to be that male clients would be exactly the same anyway. For him, the absence of male energy and the lack of men weakened the essence of counselling, since it was not truly representative.

During training, participants often felt unheard and excluded by the female trainees. Some found speaking out about this in class a little risky. However, this was countered by a realization that in wider society, men were viewed as oppressive towards women and were therefore justifiable targets for women's anger.

Here, there seem to be echoes of a need to fit in with others, a process that demands a sacrifice of the self. As Heidegger (2010, p. 122) notes:

> Dasein stands in subservience to others. It itself is not; the others have taken its being away from it. The everyday possibilities of being of Dasein are at the disposal of the

> whims of others. These others are not definite others. On the contrary any other can represent them.

Becoming a (male) therapist appeared to have a paradoxical impact on participants' relationships. While embracing a new identity and engaging in work more intimate than that of their previous career, they experienced marginalization; in their new work they experienced increasing isolation while developing deeper, more intimate relationships. The very things that brought such increased levels of intimacy and authenticity seemed also to involve withdrawal from former social circles and peer groups. While the men experienced a heightened sense of in-depth relatedness, their new work was invariably one-to-one and highly confidential. The world of the therapist seemed a very private one, and the rarity of other men meant there were fewer social and peer networking groups where participants could safely share their experiences. It was as if the new career could sometimes be a source of frustration, contributing to the 'lostness' and uncertainty of the pilgrimage. Like a pilgrim, the male therapist often seemed apart from the world, socially and professionally walking alone.

All participants underwent a dramatic shake-up of relational intimacy. During interviews, they appeared to be co-creating relational difference (or distance) through marginalization but also through the new skills they were developing, which they experienced as worthy of awe and reverence. Both aspects appeared meaningful in terms of how they felt about themselves (self-acceptance) and how they were seen by others (belonging), marking a significant shift away from their previous career and way of life. The men had a heightened sense of intimacy, which they calibrated in response to this ambivalent allure of acceptance.

Discussion

At the start of this research project, we had expected to uncover themes relating to mid-life and identity. We were therefore surprised when these did not emerge as explicitly as anticipated. Instead, we found ourselves confronted by more generic existential themes: uncertainty, not-being-at-home, becoming, authenticity and relatedness.

During their mid-life transitions, participants experienced a sense of missing something, and wanting to explore themselves more deeply. They shared a sense that becoming a therapist involved a transformation that would allow them to activate their special skills and qualities for the good of others and facilitate future personal development and growth. For participants, becoming a therapist both enhanced a sense of relatedness through the richness of therapist–client connection, and forged a sense of isolation (given the context of lone working and reduced peer contact). The transformation seemed to reflect the paradox at the heart of pilgrimage: a leaving of one's 'home' in order to find one's 'home'.

To recognize our *discontent* (meaninglessness) is to dwell with uncertainty: we are away from home when we have a relationship to home that involves separation through relationship, time and/or space. Perhaps we are returning to this home, or perhaps we will find a new home. Even the new home for a while is new only in relation to the 'old' home. Hence, our relationships, our degree of closeness or togetherness,

are brought into awareness. Heidegger referred to this awareness of intimacy as 'distantiality' (*abständigkeit*) (Heidegger, 2010, p. 122). He saw this as a means of measuring ourselves with respect to others, as part of our care for them.

The participants experienced homelessness in their distance from familiar male social or professional groups and their ways of being in such contexts. With their career change, they experienced a shift in relational awareness that made them more responsive to what they had experienced in the past, and to what they were now engaged in. A sense of distance was expressed through marginalization and isolation, while closeness was identified through relational intimacy and the sense of kudos associated with being a therapist.

We would argue that the insights provided by this phenomenological study have implications for the training of male therapists. For example, awareness of the particular difficulties experienced by some men when changing career to become therapists might encourage training organizations to target male trainees in a different way. Courses could usefully be structured to take men's potential isolation and particular support needs into consideration. Our results also suggest that the profession, along with wider society, would benefit from greater 'male-ness' entering the therapy arena, and from a broadening of the scope of therapy towards experimenting with its masculine polarity. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to suggest what form such changes might take, they would certainly include an increased number of male therapists, among them those who, in mid-life, have embarked on the uncertain, intriguing and open-ended path of pilgrimage.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. In the field of counselling and psychotherapy, pay scales are 6% lower than the national average for salaries in the UK. The UK national career service website (National Career Service, 2015) estimates the average annual salary across all sectors of the UK at £27,017 (in May 2015); the average counselling salary is listed as £25,368.
2. The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) reports less than 16% male membership. The United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) estimates this number to be 25%. Both figures based on personal correspondence in 2012 and 2013, respectively.

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