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Limitations of Civic Service: Critical Perspectives

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Worldwide, the number and diversity of civic service programs has increased steadily in recent decades. Examples include required community service by university graduates in Mexico and Nigeria, civilian service alternatives to the military in Germany and Italy, and national service opportunities for youth, adults, or elders in Ghana, Australia, and the United States. Other programs are international and transnational in their reach, recruiting and sending volunteers to every region of the world. In fact, international service programs are the most prevalent type of service found in a global assessment of 201 civic service programs (Moore et al., 2002). Across this sample, the average age of the service programs is 21 years, which suggests that service is, for the most part relatively young as an institution; it is an emerging global phenomenon. In its various forms, service is becoming a strategy for accomplishing a wide range of local, national, and global objectives (Sherraden, 2001a).

As service has increased in prevalence, so has the body of research on the various aspects and effects of service, with particular attention on service learning, youth service, and national service, primarily in the United States (Perry & Imperial, 2001). This area of study is still in its infancy, however, and much of the existing research is descriptive in nature, and is not comparative or global in its representation. Although there has been some debate about the relative merits of specific programs or types of service (Cohn & Wood, 1985; Education Commission of the States, 1999; Evers, 1990), to date there has been little consideration or research on the benefits *and* the limitations of civic service.

The global proliferation of service programs indicates a tacit presumption of their positive nature. However, a number of important questions are largely unanswered. What are the benefits of service, and who reaps those benefits? Is service a choice for the server and the served? What power differentials exist between the servers and the served? Can service programs affect long-term, meaningful change? It is imperative for any field, especially one in the initial stages of development, to be self-critical in order to understand possible ramifications and unintended consequences of its activities.

The purpose of this paper is to explore a range of possible limitations and criticisms of service, and to suggest ways to address and research these limitations. We first explore definitions and types of service, and review research regarding what is known about service. Then we examine possible limitations of civic service programs from three perspectives, elitism, state interests, and imperialism. Finally, implications of these possible limitations are drawn for civic service practice, policy, and research.

What is Civic Service?

According to a study of the etymology and historical significance of the word “service” in Greek, Latin, Japanese, Swahili, Chinese, and Sanskrit, service has historically referred to helpful actions of individuals in relation to others (Menon, Moore, and Sherraden, 2002). These actions were considered not only as self-sacrifice but also as a duty and a way of showing loyalty or devotion to the state or to a higher being. In ancient Greece and Rome, for example, male citizens fulfilled their obligation to the state through military service. Buddhist principles of helping others as a bridge to the next life strongly influenced Japanese and Chinese cultures. Service was a way of ensuring one’s salvation or securing favors from the government, and as such benefited the server as well as the served.

While service was once conceptualized in terms of individual actions, today it is often understood in terms of “societal systems of care and governance” (Menon, Moore, & Sherraden, 2002, p. 9). Ways of performing service are increasingly formal and institutionalized as well as cross-cultural. In review of the history and contemporary forms of service, civic service can be defined as “an organized period of substantial engagement and contribution to the local, national, or world community, recognized and valued by society, with minimal monetary compensation to the participant” (Sherraden, 2001b, p. 2).¹ This definition differentiates service from occasional volunteerism, provides a framework for delineating and conceptualizing the issue, and may facilitate consistency in scholarship on this topic. The focus on civic service may complement the extensive body of knowledge on military service that already exists.

Nevertheless, there are a number of ways to define service. The above definition focuses on formal means of service participation, which excludes informal systems of care more commonly found in less industrialized countries (Ehrichs, 2002). Small, collectively oriented communities often have well-developed social support and kinship networks, as well as structured communal work (Sherraden & Sherraden, 1990). In Nepal, for example, mutual assistance and communal labour exchange are common throughout the country (Krauskopff, 1999). Research using the above definition would omit these service efforts and therefore be biased toward programs and systems in “developed” countries and urban centers.

There are at least two other problematic aspects of the definition. It includes service for which there is compensation, and it does not address the voluntary or compulsory dimension of the service experience (Brown, 1999; Cnaan, Handy, & Wadsworth, 1996; Carson, 1999). For scholars who maintain that sacrifice is instrumental to produce positive effects for the server, any compensation (whether monetary or in-kind) may corrupt the process; thus, the action would not represent “volunteerism” in the true sense of the word (Bandow, 1990; Chapman, 1990). Other scholars contend that if some type of compensation is received, then the act is still service as long as the award is not equivalent to labor market wages from paid employment (Moskos, 1990). In addition, some argue that mandatory service undermines the freedom critical to the

¹ In March 2001, the Global Service Institute (GSI), led by Michael Sherraden and Susan Stroud, was established to help build a global knowledge base on civic service. This is the definition used to guide GSI’s research (<http://gwbweb.wustl.edu/csd/gsi/>).

proper functioning of democracies and the market system (Oi, 1990).² Proponents counter, however, that the rights made possible by the government obligate citizens to the government (McCurdy, referenced in Evers, 1990).

Based on the definition of service above, there are different types of service programs, which can be construed geographically and by category of server. Service programs can be local, national, international, or transnational in scope, and targeted toward servers who are younger, older, of faith, or in school. For example, there can be national youth service programs and international faith-based programs. Service programs may also differ by the type of organization that administers the program and by the specific activities that are implemented by the servers. Programs that are national in scope, for instance, tend to be government-sponsored; whereas those programs that are community-based or international tend to be developed and implemented by nonprofit organizations (Moore et al., 2002). Some programs may be specifically designed to address local social issues or to assist in disaster-relief efforts in other countries.

Research on Service

Service scholarship is predominately anecdotal and descriptive. Service programs tend to be "...judged on their intentions, not their outcomes" (Mohan, 1994, p. 264). There are few rigorous, experimental studies (Grantmaker Forum on Community and National Service, 2000; Perry & Imperial, 2001), and scant definitive evidence of the benefits or harms of service. Many important topics have not been thoroughly explored. Research has not clearly identified the effects of the service characteristics on the server, e.g., compulsory nature, training, or compensation. Neither is much known about effects of the service activities on the server or the served.

Certain types of service have been studied more than others, including service learning, youth service, and national service (Eberly & Sherraden, 1990; Education Commission of the States, 1999; Evers, 1990; Grantmaker Forum on Community and National Service, 2000; Mohan, 1994; Perry & Imperial, 2001; Roux, 1991; Sherraden, 2001a; Warner, 1995). These types of service may be more institutionalized, in terms of their connections to broad-based funding and policy support. Some programs such as the Nigerian National Youth Service Corps have simply been around longer (Iyizoba, 1982; Kalu, 1987; Omo-Abu, 1997).

For the server, service is associated with social, economic, and civic effects. Outcomes may include decreased isolation, increased tolerance and cross-group understanding, and improved mental health and self-esteem (Education Commission of the States, 1999; Mohan, 1994; Wilson & Musick, 1999). In China, for example, service may introduce urban youths to the hardships faced by the country's rural population (Eberly and Sherraden, 1990). Service is also associated with human capital outcomes, including enhanced work skills, expanded career options, and advanced educational achievement, especially for youth (Education Commission of the States, 1999; Mohan, 1994; Sherraden & Eberly, 1982). Civic outcomes have also been the goals of many programs. Service is believed to instill a sense of civic responsibility and citizenship, teach cooperation and collaboration, and increase individuals' engagement in political life

² It has been suggested that mandatory service may undermine long-term voluntary involvement (Stukas, Snyder, & Clary, 1999).

(Eberly & Sherraden, 1990; Education Commission of the States, 1999; Flanagan, Bowes, Jonsson, Csapo, & Sheblanova, 1998; Funk, 1998; Perry and Katula, 2001; Smith, 1999).

As an outcome of individual servers' heightened sense of civic duty, service may promote peace and societal well being, and increase charitable acts (Sherraden, Sherraden, & Eberly, 1990; Perry and Katula, 2001). Service may also address a range of issues, including unemployment, health problems, natural disasters, crime, and inadequate schools. In Mexico, for example, "social service" in rural areas for six months to two years is mandatory for university graduates and medical students (Sherraden and Sherraden, 1990). Furthermore, Sherraden (2001b) suggests that service may bring us closer to development of common goals that bind humanity rather than divide it.

While research has identified a range of possible positive outcomes of civic service, the possible negative outcomes remain largely unexplored. In general, the civic service field labors with attention to limitations and potential harms. Overall, scholarship has not reached the objective balance that will be necessary to assess the utility and impact of service around the world. As a small step toward correcting this imbalance, in this paper we explore some of the possible limitations of service.

Possible Limitations of Civic Service Programs

Due to the dearth of research and analysis on the possible limitations and negative consequences of service (Bandow, 1990; Cobbs, 1996; Evers, 1990; Mohan, 1994), we draw from criticisms of similar developmental policies and programs. Criticisms can be found from scholars in anthropology (Said, 1978), development (Blaut, 1993; Escobar, 1996; Ferguson, 1990; Pigg, 1993), and education (Education Commission of the United States, 1999). We group these criticisms into three categories of limitations: elitism, state interests, and imperialism. All three are interrelated. They raise questions regarding the role of individuals, groups, and nations in imposing values and conditions on others. The central theme in these limitations is control of others, ranging from paternalism to exploitation.

Elitism

For the purposes of this paper, we define elitism as the power certain members of a society have to make decisions for and dominate others—usually members of a lower class or minority group. Elitism can lead to controlled and unequal access to resources and opportunities such as education, wealth, health care, and jobs. Implicit in the concept are notions of inequality, oppression, and discrimination. Who has the opportunity to participate in service programs? Who benefits from the service programs? Do those served have a choice about being a service recipient or about what they receive? Do the services provided build the capacities of those served?

A number of studies on volunteerism in different countries find that most volunteers tend to be more highly educated and of higher income than average (Brown, 1999; Clotfelter, 1999; Husbands, McKechnie, & Gagnon, n.d.). Given these associations, there may not be an equal opportunity to serve for all persons who would like to do so. Disadvantaged individuals often

find it difficult to engage in intensive and long-term uncompensated service programs.³ Studies about the impact of service find that it is most effective when the servers are trained and have higher education (Education Commission of the States, 1999). If service programs choose to maximize their efficiency by selecting qualified participants, they run the risk of being inequitable in terms of who has access. This may be the case in South Africa, for example, where skill-based service has been criticized as elitist (Roux, 1991).

Moreover, the power differential between the servers and the served runs the risks of demeaning the served, imposing a dominant ideology on disadvantaged individuals, and perpetuating oppressive systems (Freire, 1970). This raises questions about international service programs and in particular, about paid cross-cultural “vacation-service” experiences (Moore et al., 2002). Unequal power dynamics may be exacerbated when the intended purpose of the program is to create an appreciation of how the poor live, and the server pays for that experience.

Ideally, both the server and served gain from the experience. Interestingly, however, much of the research focuses on the benefits of service to the server, especially in the case of youth service (Flanagan et al., 1998; Sherraden & Eberly, 1982). There has been little focus on outcomes for those served, or on the efficacy of the various interventions that are implemented by the servers. Former Peace Corps volunteers have reported gaining and learning more than they gave or served (Eberly & Sherraden, 1990; Armin, 1999). While this research is not representative of the experience of participants in other service programs (or of all former Peace Corps volunteers), it suggests that the benefits to the server may be greater than that to those served. Furthermore, because service may no longer be seen as a duty, program administrators focus on incentives to entice servers, and are encouraged to understand and cater to volunteers’ intrinsic motivations (Smith, 1999).

Choice to serve or to be served is another important consideration. For those served, it is relevant to ask to what extent they and their communities are involved in determining whether they need services and, if so, what kind. If they are not, then who decides what services are needed and who gets them? Do those served choose whether or not they want to receive service? One of the arguments in favor of service is that it promotes cultural integration (Iyizoba, 1982; Omo-Abu, 1997). The risk of focusing on integration, however, is that minorities are often pressured to assimilate for the sake of social conformity (Pigg, 1993). As such, service programs may threaten the pluralism that is the strength of many communities (Neuhaus, 1990). Furthermore, Evers (1990) raises the question of whether people can “voluntarily decide matters if they depend for their economic survival on others with more resources” (paraphrasing Etzioni, p. xxxviii).

One criticism of service is that it displaces natural systems of care rather than bolstering the capacity of those served (Ehrichs, 2002). The question then becomes whether or not the implemented changes are sustainable. A study of the benefits of AmeriCorps (Thomson & Perry, 1998) suggests that the positive impact may be short-term, and contingent upon the volunteers’ continued work. The risk is that service programs merely create or even increase dependency on the server and displace existing support systems, thus, potentially perpetuating

³ Although they are the exception rather than the rule, some programs (such as programs for low-income elderly or disabled volunteers) have been structured to support the inclusion of disadvantaged groups (Moore et al., 2002).

rather than addressing unequal power and access to resources (Ehrichs, 2002). McKnight (1995) criticizes formal service approaches for undermining and weakening communities by displacing or damaging existing supports and strengths.

State Interests

While service programs overall may risk reinforcing unequal power dynamics between the server and the served, government-sponsored and government-mandated programs may undermine the server's and the served's individual rights in favor of a political agenda. Government promotion of state interests is linked to elitism insofar as decision-making power and control is often held in the hands of a select few, but national service programs may trigger further concerns. National service can resemble the military draft, with a combination of civic and military conscription or governmental promotion of voluntary civic service (Evers, 1990). Criticisms are that national service may interfere with the free market system, institutionalize too much government involvement in civic life, impose a universal approach to local social problems that require unique solutions, favor communal rights over individual rights, and politicize volunteerism.

Oi (1990) likens mandatory national service to forced labor, and criticizes it for interfering with the market system as well as undermining individual rights and choice. According to Oi, mandatory service allows the government to acquire labor at less than its market value, which in turn lowers the efficiency and productivity of the workforce. He and other critics of national service (e.g., Bandow, 1990) contend that the cost of public and military work is higher when national service is compulsory than when it is not. On the other hand, critics of volunteerism question whether or not organizations are exploiting free or low-cost labor, with the benefits going to them rather than to the server (Education Commission of the States, 1999).

National service is sometimes opposed on the grounds that it allows for too much government control (Evers, 1990). In answer to advocates' claims that service will strengthen the moral fiber of the server, critics question the role of the government in determining and defining proper moral conduct. Furthermore, they question whether mandating that people care about their communities will automatically corrupt the nature and goal of service (Mohan, 1994). Finally, concerns are raised about the government's ability to decide what needs are not being met, how to respond to those needs, and what training is needed by the server (Evers, 1990).

Mohan (1994) questions whether or not national service has the capacity to solve serious social problems, especially when the economy is in recession. According to him, service programs may divert funding away from other needed government programs. Furthermore, rather than promoting civic engagement and a healthy democracy—which rely on questioning and critical thinking—service depoliticizes issues and teaches conformity to social norms (McKnight, 1995; Mohan, 1994).

Another question is whether the rights of individuals can and should be waived for the good of the community. Opponents say that eroding individual freedom through mandatory service is similar to enforced obligation to the state, which is demanded by totalitarian regimes (Epstein, 2002). And in some instances, the state turns service to evil ends. Horrific examples are the Hitler Youth in Germany and the Red Guard in China (Sherraden, Sherraden, & Eberly, 1990).

Another point of contention is whether or not disadvantaged individuals should be required to serve in order to receive state benefits. While advocates of this policy say that it is a way of meriting assistance rather than treating it as an entitlement, opponents say that it unfairly increases the burdens of disadvantaged people (Evers, 1990; Mohan, 1994).

Also, a number of critics suggest that moving service from the private to the public realm automatically transforms its purposes and goals to a political agenda (critics include Friedman, Chapman, Walter Oi, and Bandow, as cited in Evers, 1990). Said (paraphrasing Gramsci, 1978) distinguishes between civil society's voluntary, reciprocal relationships, and political society's coercive, hierarchical ones. According to Said, cultural practices that are used by government and thus for political purposes, automatically lose their consensual nature. This is what Gramsci (1971) referred to as hegemony—the process by which subordinate groups or individuals internalize a dominant understanding of the world, which blocks their own conception and prevents them from acting to improve their situation.

Imperialism

Just as governments may use mandatory service to tighten control over citizens, transnational and international service programs have been criticized for promoting their own social, economic, and political gains in other countries. Some claim that this is a manifestation of imperialism. According to Downing, Mohammadi, and Sreberny-Mohammadi (1995), “imperialism is the conquest and control of one country by a more powerful one. Cultural imperialism signifies the dimensions of the process that go beyond economic exploitation or military force” (p. 482). In the past two decades, an increasing number of academics have criticized the field of “development” (Blaut, 1993; Escobar, 1996; Ferguson, 1990; Pigg, 1993).⁴ While these criticisms may not always apply to service programs and activities, international service programs are often used as a strategy for approaching development goals. We summarize objections to development, and explore how they may be relevant to service.

One of the criticisms of development is that it is an outgrowth of colonialism, and thus, promotes imperialistic goals. In the *Colonizer's Model of the World*, Blaut (1993) discusses the way “Eurocentric diffusionism”⁵ was used during colonial times to justify the exploitation of other cultures. According to his research, there was little disparity in agricultural and environmental practices, wealth, and technology between Europe and other countries until colonial expansion bolstered European wealth and divested the colonized from access to their own resources.

According to Escobar (1996), the idea of development was first conceived following World War II, when access to raw materials in former colonies seemed crucial to the reconstruction of Europe. It was during this time that the Western governing elite “discovered” poverty on a global scale, and conceptualized it as a technical problem. Development was viewed as a

⁴ The word development typically refers to all activities (political, social, and economic) designed to promote economic growth in less industrialized countries.

⁵ Eurocentric diffusionism refers to the idea that Europeans possess biological characteristics that give them an inherent superiority over other countries and races. Central to diffusionism is the idea that other countries do not possess the qualities necessary to create and innovate without external help (Blaut, 1993).

solution to poverty, and the idea of the “three worlds” emerged as a way to categorize countries (Escobar, 1996). During this time, missionary work was instrumental in spreading the development ideal (Ehrichs, 2002). Indeed, the modernizing goal of development was closely linked to Christianity’s civilizing objective of bringing education and enlightenment to the “primitives” (Mudimbe, 1997). From this system of thought, intervention practices and policies evolved that were designed to pull Third World countries out of their destitution (see Truman, [1949] 1964). In a study of the construction of a development discourse in Lesotho, Ferguson (1990) outlines how development reports and activities have presented the country’s problems as stemming from a lack of exposure to modern technology and infrastructures. According to Ferguson, this depiction does not reflect the country’s reality, historical context, resources, or capabilities; rather, it provides justification for Western intervention.

Volunteer activities have also been used to promote foreign policy goals. During the Cold War, for example, Western countries’ volunteerism was seen as a way of gaining allegiance from neutral countries. “The Peace Corps was one of the most successful strategies of the post-World War II period for making friends for America in the Third World” (Cobbs, 1996, p. 80). The Peace Corps was developed as a complement to U.S. war efforts by showing what the country stood for, not just what it stood against. In order to spread pro-Western attitudes in “Third World” countries, idealistic youth were to live in those countries, to teach English, agriculture, and public health, and to spread Western ideals of democracy and freedom.

International service has also been used to strengthen national policies of both sender and receiver nations. As a foreign policy tool, it helps foster a sense of collective identity and pride, thereby increasing consensus over national goals. In post-World War II Europe, for example, international volunteerism gained the support of and became a political strategy for unifying both the detractors of colonialism and those who sought to maintain colonial ties. In the Netherlands, ex-colonial administrators actually became volunteer coordinators in their former colonies (Cobbs, 1996). In addition, just as colonialism created social divisions within colonized countries, development depoliticizes and thus reinforces the power of the ruling elite by representing the state as a benign dispenser of services, removed from the social problems it is intended to solve (Ferguson, 1990).

Current international and transnational service programs continue to run the risk of perpetuating the cultural, political, and economic hegemony of “First World” over “Third World” countries, spreading notions of development and underdevelopment. While the covert, and sometimes overt, intent of development is economic growth, cultural hegemony is both an outcome of economic growth and a way of promoting it. For example, Pigg (1993) shows how development activities in Nepal shaped the way villagers viewed themselves and internalized notions of being underdeveloped, while at the same time reinforcing caste divisions inherent to Nepali culture. The served often learn to view themselves as poor and ignorant (Pigg, 1993), and may gain much less than the server.

In addition, because the servers often do not know the language or the culture, they typically rely on Westernized elite to represent the host country and identify its problems. Service may consequently benefit the privileged more than underserved populations (Ehrichs, 2002). Furthermore, international service opportunities are often advertised as a cheap way of traveling

and seeing the world—a form of tourism. While this can help the local economy, it may be ineffectual in addressing social and economic problems. Since international program outcomes have not been systematically evaluated, whether these programs have a positive or negative impact on the receiving communities is not known.

Addressing Limitations: Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

As civic service policy is developed, policy-makers should be cognizant of potential limitations. Local, national, international, and transnational policies, especially those mandating service participation, should be open to public scrutiny and input. This includes service-learning programs that require community service of students for course-credit and graduation.

Especially in times of perceived national crisis and/or patriotic fervor, when policy excesses are common, policy-makers should be thoughtful in seeking to limit potentially oppressive and exploitative features of service.

Thoughtful, informed program development is crucial to ensure the achievement of benefits, and amelioration of negative effects. Community-driven models of program development emphasize the involvement of those who are to be “served.” This ensures that the served can voice their concerns and desired outcomes, and provide input and feedback on service activities. Participatory planning and implementation may lessen power differentials by empowering the served (Chambers, 1997; Ehrichs, 2002; McKnight, 1995). Through this process, program models can reflect intended outcomes for both the server and the served. This approach to program development is relevant for all types of service, perhaps especially international service.

Identification and examination of the population(s) targeted to serve is an integral part of program development. There may be differences between who is targeted to serve and who is able to serve. Ability to serve may be constrained by economic or physical factors, beyond individual control. Incentives and compensation can be structured such that service programs become more inclusive. AmeriCorps is an example. This program focuses on recruiting servers from disadvantaged circumstances who may benefit from the educational awards given at the end of the service term. Mobility International in Belgium focuses on service opportunities for those with physical disabilities. Innovation may be required in the way activities are delivered. In Europe, there has been interest and expansion of “on-line” volunteering, which may offer greater potential for those with physical disabilities.

Goal-based program development and implementation may contribute to an increase in positive outcomes and reduction of negative outcomes. Research should evaluate short and long-term effects of service in relation to stated goals, as well as examine unanticipated effects of service on both the server and the served. Particular efforts should be made to test for negative outcomes. Only in doing so will the knowledge base on service become balanced and credible.

The nature of service activity, including its approach, delivery, and duration, will affect service outcomes as well. A wide range of program features should be examined in relation to key outcomes. Areas of study should include type of service, duration, location, training, and service

delivery process on outcomes. Also of interest are servers' perceptions of service experiences and differences between compulsory and voluntary service on servers' long-term civic engagement. It is important to examine effects of incentives on service participation, and in the case of post-service awards, what long-term effects they may have on the servers' life prospects and well being.

Development of service process and outcome measures can be informed by qualitative research with individuals and communities that are involved in service. Especially in the early stages of developing a knowledge base, qualitative research, including case studies, focus groups, and in-depth interviewing, will be important.

Ultimately, longitudinal, experimental or quasi-experimental research will be important. It is essential to have a valid comparison. A key policy question is: compared to similar individuals and communities that have not been involved in service, are there differences in outcomes?

Whenever possible, systematic study should be guided by theory and hypothesis testing, and should include assessment of alternative hypotheses (i.e., critical tests). At the end of the day, knowledge will accumulate more efficiently and meaningfully within coherent and logical theoretical viewpoints.

Policy and research should acknowledge the bias implicit in a formal conceptualization of civic service. Non-institutionalized, informal forms of service in nations and cultures around the world have not been extensive subjects of study. In consideration of increased social, economic, and political outcomes, perhaps organic, community-based forms of care are a more efficient means than organized service programs. How do these two approaches differ? What can be learned from informal service?

Also, assessing the effects of service across different types of programs will advance the civic service field. As in all social science research, when similar patterns emerge in different contexts, the knowledge base and predictability are strengthened.

Conclusion

Civic service can lead to positive social, economic, and political changes in those who serve, as well as those who are served. But service can also lead to negative changes. As the field develops, a critical eye is warranted to ensure that negative consequences are ameliorated or avoided. This paper has identified possible limitations related to power, exploitation, and government interference.⁶ Sensitivity to issues of bias, exclusion, control, and cultural exploitation will be important in service development and implementation. A research agenda that is rigorous, cross-cultural, and critical can help build a balanced knowledge base for more informed decision-making regarding civic service.

⁶ Other possible limitations could be discussed as well, e.g., economic inefficiency,

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