Understanding workplace bullying: a practical application of Giddens’ Structuration Theory

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Workplace bullying is a significant and complex international issue that presents a challenge for organisations to manage. It is proposed that Giddens’ Theory of Structuration (1984) may provide a basis for examining the social processes involved in the approaches adopted by organisations to manage workplace bullying. This paper presents a method for understanding organisational issues related to workplace bullying. The process of developing the individual interview questions is described. Giddens’ Theory of Structuration (1984) provides the theoretical background for the questions. In 1991, Turner described Giddens’ theory in terms of a framework with 11 key sensitising concepts. This paper defines each of these concepts in turn, discusses them in relation to workplace bullying and presents an interview question to explore each concept. Giddens’ framework involves a series of stages, with the possibility of barriers between each of the stages. Within this theory strategies between the stages and tactics within the stages could be developed to address the problem of workplace bullying.

workplace bullying, management, Giddens’ Structuration Theory

INTRODUCTION

International interest in workplace bullying has flourished over the latter part of the past decade. Concerned community groups, government agencies and workplaces have tried to discern how best to manage it; research indicates that the problem is complex and widespread. The first study in the United Kingdom to establish the incidence of workplace bullying was reported by Rayner in 1997. Her study revealed that over half of the 1137 respondents had experienced workplace bullying, and more than three quarters of respondents had observed it. These findings led Rayner to conclude that “bullying is part of many people’s working lives” (Rayner, 1997, p. 207). Subsequent research in the United Kingdom by Hoel and Cooper (2000), who surveyed a representative sample of 5,288 employees at random, revealed that one in ten respondents reported they had been bullied in the last six months; nearly a quarter reported having been bullied in the last five years. Together, these studies indicate that workplace bullying is a significant hazard affecting people at work to-day. Prevention and management of workplace bullying is therefore a substantial challenge for all concerned.

Workplace bullying has various definitions; however, there are three key components to most definitions (Quine, 1999). First, it is defined in terms of its effect on the recipient not the intention of the bully; second, bullying has a negative impact on the victim; and third, it is a repeated activity. The Office of the Employee Ombudsman (1999) stated that power imbalance is a key component of all definitions, and defined bullying thus, “Workplace bullying involves the persistent ill treatment of an individual at work by one or more other persons” (Office of the Employee Ombudsman, 1999, p. 3).

Legislative provisions for dealing with workplace bullying have been called for by researchers in the United Kingdom (Rayner, 1997) and Australia (McCarthy et al, 1995; Thomson, 1997). Sweden led the world in this regard by implementing the Offensive Discrimination at Work Act 1994 (Thomson, 1997). In the United Kingdom, the Dignity at Work Bill was put before the House of Lords in 1996, aimed at preventing workplace bullying and providing “effective
remedies for the victims” (Sheehan et al, 1999). Although this Bill was not subsequently passed it was a powerful attempt to enhance harmonious workplace relationships. Currently there are moves within Australia to adopt legislative controls to address the issue of workplace bullying. In Victoria, a Draft Code of Practice was released for public comment earlier this year (Victorian WorkCover Authority, 2001) with a view to introducing a proposed Code of Practice in 2002. No formal discussion paper has yet been released in South Australia, but other public documents released locally, including research from the Working Women’s Centre in South Australia (Thomson, 1997) and the Employee Ombudsman’s report Bullies Not Wanted (1999), indicate that workplace bullying is an important issue for South Australians. This interest in workplace bullying arises from new ideas of fairness and justice that have become accepted in a changing multicultural, multiracial Australian society with equality between the sexes and across age levels as well as across different racial and cultural groups.

This paper describes the background to the method of current research aimed at understanding organisational issues related to workplace bullying in South Australia. The focus of the paper is on the development of interview questions employed in the study; these are based on Giddens’ Theory of Structuration (Giddens, 1984). Research to date on organisational aspects of workplace bullying is lacking a theoretical basis, and Giddens’ theory has not previously been reported in workplace bullying research literature. The following section of the paper presents information on the theory.

A DESCRIPTION OF THE KEY ELEMENTS OF STRUCTURATION THEORY

In 1984, sociologist Giddens presented his theory of Structuration (Giddens, 1984). In simple terms his theory outlines the social processes involved in the evolution of aspects of society. A key component of his theory is the double hermeneutic process, where people, upon reflection of day to day activities, are able to influence the structure of society by either reproducing current practices or by changing them. School and workplace bullying have a long history within our society and recent ideas have been advanced that challenge the appropriateness of such traditional behaviour. Turner (1991) analysed Giddens’ work and produced a diagrammatic model of his Theory of Structuration. The model with its 11 sensitising concepts is illustrated in Figure 1. It is proposed in this study to use Turner’s model, which consists of inter-linked but discrete concepts, to provide a framework for illuminating how a social issue, such as workplace bullying, can be managed within an organisation.

![Figure 1. The 11 sensitising concepts of Giddens' Theory of Structuration presented by Turner (1991, p. 536)](image)

Each of the sensitising concepts is defined in the following section of this paper. Where possible Giddens’ glossary of terms from his work The Constitution of Society (1984) has been used to define the concepts. Where his definitions are unclear, Turner’s reading of the concepts provides additional clarity. In each case the definition is followed by an interpretation of the sensitising concept in relation to workplace bullying. For the current study an interview question was constructed for each of these 11 concepts (shown in Table 1).
1. **Needs for ontological security**

Giddens described ontological security as the “Confidence or trust that the natural and social worlds are as they appear to be, including the basic existential parameters of self and social identity” (Giddens, 1984, p. 375). Turner further explained the concept,

> one of the driving but highly diffuse forces behind action is the desire to sustain ontological security or the sense of trust that comes from being able to reduce anxiety in social situations. Actors need to have this sense of trust. (Turner, 1991, p. 532)

For people to be able to perform their work to the best of their ability it is argued that they require ontological security. This is most likely to happen in a supportive work environment where the employees are able to devote their attention to the task at hand rather than being concerned for their own personal well being (mental and physical) at the workplace. The South Australian Occupational Health, Safety and Welfare Act (1986) promotes such ontological security. Under Section 19 of this Act, employers have a Duty of Care to provide a safe workplace for their staff.

2. **Unconscious motives**

Giddens proposed that unconscious motives play an important role in actors being able to attain ontological security. This concept was further explained by Turner, “The basic ‘force’ behind much action is an unconscious set of processes to gain a ‘sense of trust’ in interaction with others” (Turner, 1991, p. 532). These unconscious motives also lie beneath our stock knowledge of how we should act in certain situations. “There are many pressures to act in certain ways that an actor does not perceive…much of what propels action lies below consciousness” (Turner, 1991, p.532).

In the current study I aim to develop an understanding of what has led to the recent interest in the concept of workplace bullying and to tap into some of the unconscious motives that lead to the issue of workplace bullying being addressed.

3. **Practical consciousness**

Practical consciousness is a term that refers to “the stock of knowledge that one implicitly uses to act in situations and to interpret the actions of others. It is this knowledgeability that is constantly used, but rarely articulated, to interpret events – one’s own and those of others” (Turner, 1991, p.531).

Giddens defined practical consciousness in the following way,

> What actors know (believe) about social conditions, including especially the conditions of their own action, but cannot express discursively; no bar of repression, however, protects practical consciousness as is the case with the unconscious. (Giddens, 1984, p. 375)

Each person within an organisation brings with him or her to work a certain practical consciousness or stock knowledge of what constitutes appropriate workplace behaviour. This stock knowledge forms a basis from which people undertake and interpret interactions with other staff and customers. It is possible that this stock knowledge may be modified by the requirements of the work tasks, peer pressure or the culture of the workplace.

4. **Discursive consciousness**

Turner states that discursive consciousness, “involves the capacity to give reasons for or rationalise what one does (and presumably to do the same for others’ behaviour)” (Turner, 1991, p. 531).

Giddens defined discursive consciousness as, “What actors are able to say, or to give verbal expression to, about social conditions, including especially the conditions of their own action; awareness which has a discursive form” (Giddens, 1984, p. 374).
People within an organisation could be expected to participate in discussions about workplace behaviour. Further, people could be expected to differentiate between behaviours that are appropriate and those that are not, the latter may include workplace bullying. Similar discussions have taken place in the past within society and within organisations about other social issues, for example, harassment based on race or gender. Liefooghe and Olafsson (1999) reported that,

One way to start increasing people’s awareness is through discussion in groups about their understanding of what constitutes workplace bullying. This will facilitate the development of a shared frame of reference, which will help to reduce ambiguity about the interpretation of the bullying behaviour and thus facilitate preventative and remedial action. (Liefooghe and Olafsson, 1999, p. 47)

5. Social systems of interaction

Within society and within organisations there are discrete social systems of interaction. Examples of these within the general community might include religious groups and political parties. At the workplace discrete groups might include work units, for example the Research and Development Unit or the Marketing Unit, and other groups such as the staff social club. Each of these “systems” works in its own individual way.

Giddens described such systems as,

The patterning of social relations across time-space, understood as reproduced practices. Social systems should be regarded as widely variable in terms of the degree of ‘systemness’ they display and rarely have the sort of internal unity which may be found in physical and biological systems. (Giddens, 1984, p. 377)

Given the variability that might be displayed within these units or systems it is likely that some social systems within society are more or less tolerant of workplace bullying than other systems. Similarly individual units and groups within organisations might vary in their tolerance of workplace bullying.

6. Regionalisation/routinisation

Routines that people engage in and the territory they occupy are important in establishing and maintaining relationships at the workplace. Turner writes:

Both the ontological security of agents and the institutionalization of structures in time and space depend upon routinized and regionalized interaction among actors. Routinization of interaction patterns is what gives them continuity across time, thereby reproducing structure (rules and resources) and structures (institutions). At the same time, routinization gives predictability to actions and, in so doing, provides for a sense of ontological security. Thus routines become critical for the most basic aspects of structure and human agency. Similarly, regionalization orders action in space by positioning actors in places vis-à-vis one another and by circumscribing how they are to present themselves and act. As with routines, the regionalization of interaction is essential to the sustenance of broader structural patterns and ontological security of actors, because it orders people’s interactions in space and time, which in turn reproduces structures and meets an agent’s need for ontological security. (Turner, 1991, p. 533)

When people work within an organisation they become socialised into the routines of that workplace. An interruption of these routines, for example when introducing change, may cause discomfort to a person’s ontological security. McCarthy et al (1995) found that during organisational restructuring, managers adopted inappropriately coercive behaviours and many employees reported being bullied.

In addition to the routines people become familiar with at the workplace, people are usually given their own workspace within an organisation. The workspace may be a place on the production line, a company vehicle, or an office. There are also generally designated areas for staff to take their breaks such as a staff tea-room. These spaces and facilities for staff fall under the umbrella of regionalisation as described by Giddens and Turner. Such distanciation enables people to maintain their own “space” and may to some extent enhance their
ontological security. Encroaching on a person’s physical or mental “space” at the workplace, and causing them distress when doing this, may constitute workplace bullying.

7. Structural properties/institutions

Giddens described structural properties as “Structured features of social systems, especially institutionalized features, stretching across time and space” (Giddens, 1984, p. 377).

I will illustrate my interpretation of the term structural properties by example. In many organisations staff are consulted about the generation of a policy (discursive consciousness) and are given the opportunity to provide feedback while the policy is in draft form. Such feedback is then generally incorporated, or at least considered, before the policy is released in its final form. At the time of the introduction of a new policy, a review date is generally set at which time the policy is again circulated for comment and modification as appropriate. In this example, structure is a feature of the process; the system of consultation is sequential and crosses all sectors of the organisation.

8. Structural sets

Turner described structural sets as the “rule/resource bundles, or combinations and configurations of rules and resources, which are used to produce and reproduce certain types and forms of social relations across time and space” (Turner, 1991, p. 529). He continued, “…the general idea [is] that the general structural principles of class societies are transformed into more specific sets of rules and resources that agents use to mediate social relations” (Turner, 1991, p. 529).

For the purposes of the current investigation I have interpreted structural sets as rules and resources emanating from an organisation or from within individual units of an organisation, such as the Human Resources Unit or the Occupational Health and Safety Unit of a large organisation. Each of these individual Units would generate rules and policies that guide social relations within the organisation. For example the Human Resources Unit may develop a code of conduct or a no bullying policy and accompanying grievance procedures.

9. Structural principles

Turner has written structural principles “are the most general principles that guide the organization of societal totalities” (Turner, 1991, p. 528). Giddens defined them as, “Principles of organization of societal totalities; factors involved in the overall institutional alignment of a society or type of society” (Giddens, 1984, p. 376).

I have interpreted structural principles in several ways. I think structural principles are, in part, organisational objectives, and that they reflect the purpose of the business, such as customer service and/or a quality product. Coupled with this interpretation of structural principles as organisational objectives, is the suggestion that structural principles also include the values that an organisation holds. In this way I think that structural principles are tied to organisational culture. Schein, in his text on organisational culture and leadership stated, “that culture is a deep phenomenon, that culture is complex and difficult to understand, but that the effort to understand it is worthwhile because much of the mysterious and irrational in organisations suddenly becomes clear when we do understand it” (Schein, 1985, p. 5). Giddens suggested that contradictions in structural principles may occur. Contradictions may occur at a workplace where there is some variance between the organisational objectives and the organisational culture, and such variance may lead to ontological insecurity in employees.

A structural principle in relation to workplace bullying may be that an organisation aims to become a bully-free workplace of its own volition. The principle in this case is to deal with the issue in a pro-active manner as some companies have done (Crawford, 1999). Another workplace may decide that they would not do anything about workplace bullying unless they
were required to, for example to comply with legislation; thus their structural principle is reactive rather than proactive.

10. Rules and resources

Turner has argued that “Rules are ‘generalizable procedures’ that actors understand and use in various circumstances” (Turner, 1991, p. 523). Organisations themselves abide by the rules of the society in which they are located and each individual organisation has its own rules. In South Australia employers are required to comply with legislative requirements of the Occupational Health, Safety and Welfare Act (1986). Turner goes on to say “Resources are facilities that actors use to get things done” (Turner 1991, p. 524), and “Rules and resources are mediating in that they are what tie social relations together. They are what actors use to create, sustain, or transform relations across time and in space. And, because rules and resources are inherently transformational – that is, generative of diverse combinations – they can lace together many different patterns of social relations in time and space” (Turner 1991, pp. 534-535).

Within all organisations there are explicit and implicit rules that guide peoples’ behaviour. In large organisations explicit rules might include a policy relating to behaviour for example regarding bullying at work. Implicit rules is a term used to describe the generally unspoken and unwritten rules of the workplace (Hopkins 2000). These rules might include some of the initiation rituals that workers sometimes use to “welcome” new staff.

Resources that might be mobilized in putting a no-bullying policy in place include staff time for the development of policies and procedures, and resources allocated for educating staff, including down time to attend training sessions.

11. Structure

Giddens defined structure in the following manner, “Rules and resources, recursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems. Structure exists only as memory traces, the organic basis of human knowledgeability, and instantiated in action” (Giddens, 1984, p. 377).

For the purposes of the current study I have interpreted structure to mean the management structure of an organisation, such as a flat or hierarchical management system. An organisation with a hierarchical management structure, such as the fire service, may provide particular opportunities for workplace bullying (Archer, 1999).

The double hermeneutic principle

Structural change in organisations is likely to occur in response to pressures exerted by forces external to, and/or from within an organisation. In workplace bullying such external pressures, may, for example, be new ideas circulating in the wider community that lead to legislative requirements which arise in response to lobbying from community groups, unions or regulatory agencies. Internal forces trying to address workplace bullying may arise at various levels within the organisational structure, for example, from senior management, from units concerned with staff welfare such as occupational health and safety or human resources, or from groups of concerned workers. Giddens describes a process called the double hermeneutic where people can bring about change through their actions following reflection on their own world view and in the light of new knowledge and understanding. The internet is a particularly useful vehicle for both researchers and lay people to access new material and the rapid speed of information transmission enables people interested in the subject of workplace bullying to keep up to date and informed about current issues and research. Equality of opportunity for women in the workplace was the focus of public discussion in the past and following this people across the globe are now striving for equity and fairness at the workplace. The double hermeneutic principle underlies this process of new knowledge influencing social and structural change.
THE AIMS OF THE CURRENT STUDY

The current study seeks to answer the three following research questions:

1. Why has workplace bullying become an important issue to South Australian organisations?
2. What are the stages and barriers to addressing the issue of workplace bullying?
3. What strategies and tactics are employed in addressing the problem of workplace bullying?

The method used to answer these questions will be to interview a purposeful sample of key stakeholders within the movement against workplace bullying in South Australia. The purpose of such detailed consideration of Giddens Theory of Structuration and Turner’s reading of the Giddens work is to investigate whether Turner’s framework is useful in exploring the concept of how organisations manage workplace bullying. Defining and interpreting the 11 sensitising concepts described by Turner (1991) is undertaken with the deliberate purpose of composing interview questions to examine the concepts. In order to do this a series of interview questions (Table 1) have been developed to illuminate each of the sensitising concepts described by Turner (1991). These questions are listed in Table 1 and are aligned with Turner’s 11 sensitising concepts that are illustrated as cells in Figure 1. The people in the purposeful sample hold positions where they provide “expert advice” to organisations about the management of workplace bullying. They therefore have an important educative role in assisting organisations to learn about, and deal with, the problem of workplace bullying. Three pilot interviews have been conducted prior to the study. The focus of the first two was on the research questions, the focus of the third was on the interview questions; these seemed to work reasonably well, although a slight change in the sequence of the questions was decided upon for the actual study. To date, four interviews with experts have been conducted, another three are scheduled. In each case respondents have been sent the questions at least a week in advance of the interview.

Table 1. Interview questions aligned with Turner’s (1991) sensitising concepts based on Giddens’ Theory of Structuration (Giddens, 1984)*

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<tr>
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<th>Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>What conditions must exist within organisations for people to feel free of bullying at the workplace?</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>How did the issue of workplace bullying come to the attention of South Australian organisations?</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>What sort of issues regarding workplace bullying are organisations concerned about?</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>How do staff within organisations go about raising issues related to bullying that they want aired or addressed?</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>What are the particular ways of behaving towards each other at workplaces that have been set up that encourage/discourage bullying?</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>What routine procedures/strategies do organisations put into place to try and promote a bully-free workplace?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What spaces have organisations set up to promote a bully-free workplace?</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>What organisational systems enable (or provide barriers to) the bullying issue being addressed?</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>How do individual organisations work in different ways to promote a bully-free environment?</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>What are the organisational principles and values that encourage/discourage bullying at work?</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>What explicit rules are there (if any) regarding bullying behaviour within South Australian organisations?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What implicit rules are there (if any) regarding bullying behaviour within South Australian organisations?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What resources have organisations committed to addressing workplace bullying?</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>How do you see that an organisations’ management structure may influence bullying at the workplace?</td>
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* Question numbers in the left hand column correspond with cell numbers in Figure 1

REFLECTIONS AND DISCUSSION

How to address the problem of workplace bullying is an issue of international interest due to the extent of the problem (Hoel and Cooper, unpublished; McCarthy et al, 1995; Rayner, 1997;
Thomson, 1997). The adverse effects on the victim may be physical, emotional or behavioural (Lewis, 1999; Quine, 1999; Thomson, 1997). There is considerable expense to organisations arising from workplace bullying. Direct costs include medical and legal costs (McCarthy, 1999), indirect costs include dysfunction and inefficiency at the workplace. For example, Rayner (1997) found staff turnover due to workplace bullying may be as high as 25%. Ultimately the community pays a high price for workplace bullying.

This paper has described the background to the interview questions I have developed for my current research into organisational aspects of workplace bullying. To my knowledge Giddens’ Theory of Structuration has not previously been used as a basis for workplace bullying research. Turner’s (1991) model should prove useful to practitioners working with organisations to address workplace bullying. It illustrates the sequential stages that an organisation might consider when working to manage the problem. These stages start with recognising that an individual feels unsafe when bullied at the workplace (ontological security), and go to discussions about workplace bullying within the organisation (discursive consciousness), to decisions about whether to tackle bullying in a proactive or reactive manner (structural principles). Further stages include the implementation of policies (rules and resources) and an examination of the management set-up itself (structure). The model may also be helpful in anticipating where barriers to managing workplace bullying will arise so that thought can be given as how best to overcome them.

A challenge I faced in using Giddens’ theory was defining each of the 11 sensitising concepts described by Turner (1991). Some of the definitions provided by Giddens are unclear and even after having sought further understanding through Turner’s reading of Giddens model, they remain unclear. In those cases I interpreted them for the purposes of the study. One such difficulty arose in my own interpretation of the difference between structural properties and structural principles and I did not find my reading of either Giddens’ or Turners’ work really helped differentiate and clarify the differences for me. In order to overcome this sort of difficulty I spent considerable time in round table discussions with two senior academics, one familiar with Giddens’ and Turners’ work and the other familiar with the organisational processes involved in addressing bullying. Together we clarified our understanding of the theory.

It is not known at this stage how clearly respondents’ responses will illustrate the sensitising concepts. From the pilot interviews conducted to date, it would seem that some of the concepts such as ontological security, discursive consciousness, and rules and resources are all themes that respondents can clearly describe. One concept that some pilot respondents found difficult to relate to is the concept of regionalisation (spaces) and routinisation, particularly the implicit rules.

There is a considerable amount of overlap between the 11 sensitising concepts and this is illustrated by the double headed arrows in Figure 1. This meant that in some of the interviews conducted to date there has been some repetition in responses as the interview progressed. Whether this would have occurred if the interview questions had been asked in the reverse order, that is starting with the questions about structure and working through to ontological security is not known. As victim vulnerability is, by definition, a feature of workplace bullying it seemed logical to start the interview off with a question about ontological security.

The responses respondents give will provide information to answer the three research questions of why the issue has become important, barriers to addressing the problem and factors that constitute best practice in managing workplace bullying at an organisational level.

**CONCLUSION**

Workplace bullying is a serious international problem that is bereft of a theoretical basis for understanding it as an organisational problem. Research and interview questions have been presented that are currently being used in a South Australian study to further an understanding
of the organisational aspects of managing workplace bullying. The interview questions have been developed based on Giddens’ Theory of Structuration (1984). From the interpretation of Giddens’ theory provided by Turner (1991), a model with 11 sensitising concepts has proved to be useful in developing a grasp of the theory. These concepts were considered in the light of workplace bullying within an organisation and a question was developed for each concept. The development of questions following the model gives a structured basis to the interviews. Responses should provide a deeper understanding of how organisations manage workplace bullying; information that is likely to be useful to practitioners working in this field. Challenges and changes to existing and accepted workplace practices reflect the double hermeneutic process at work.

REFERENCES


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