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Abstract

Purpose. The purpose of this paper is to present the learning gained from undertaking research activities in co-production with young people in order to tackle alcohol misuse in local communities.

Design/methodology/approach. The findings are drawn from an evaluation of an alcohol misuse change programme in which opportunities to learn about and conduct research were provided to young people through co-production. The evaluation was guided by a theory of change, and a portfolio of evidence collected which included feedback from the young people and project staff about their experiences.

Findings. This paper demonstrates that young people can be empowered to take on roles as agents of change in their own communities by learning more about research processes. However, the empowerment does not come from undertaking research training per se, but by being able to work co-productively with researchers on issues and questions that are of direct relevance to themselves and which are framed within a change agenda. Shared values, strong relationships and reciprocal knowledge exchange enabling flexible and relevant responses to real-world problems and questions are needed.

Originality/value. The paper suggests a reflexive and co-productive learning, design and delivery approach to involving young people in research. It challenges notions of young people

as a problem in terms of alcohol misuse, and rather situates them as part of a solution that is aiming at longer-term transformational community change. This is significant in that much of the existing evidence concentrates on individual intervention.

Paper type. Research

Keywords. Co-production; participation; alcohol programme, young people, agents of change

Introduction

The co-production of research and young people's participation in the delivery of services are not new concepts for researchers in fields that have direct relevance to the lived experiences of young people. However, much of the research that concerns young people typically excludes them from roles other than as respondents, and fails to ensure their genuine and meaningful participation (Daly, 2014; James, 2011; Lundy, 2007; Stalford and Drywood, 2009). Levels of participation vary enormously depending on the ethos of the researcher and the scope of the research being conducted (Clark and Laing, 2012). There has been a change in rhetoric that highlights the value of participation (Phillips and Prout, 2003), but there is less evidence about how this works in practice, and whether such participation, when it occurs, is effective (Todd, 2012; Henricson and Bainham, 2005). The agendas and processes by which young people can engage in service delivery and evaluation are often heavily prescribed by adults.

There is no consensus around how to define co-production but there is agreement that co-production is multi-faceted and varied (Alford, 2014). In respect of research, it has been described in a number of ways: as co-creation, democratic, user-led or emancipatory research and it is closely associated with traditions of participatory action research (Campbell and

Vanderhoven, 2016). There is also a growing consensus about the challenges of co-production, and what it is 'not'. This includes indirect service user consultation, involvement in service design or assessment (tokenism) (Carey, 2009) and challenges include the potential to further marginalise disadvantaged groups (Markkanen and Burgess, 2016) and the cost and time associated with recruiting and training members (Boyle and Harris, 2009). However, co-production can be said to have several important and necessary features, in that it brings people together who have different skills and experiences to work to influence change. In this way, it can be seen as potentially transformative, in that it brings new ways of thinking on the basis of insights into everyday practices (Bergold and Thomas, 2012). The process of co-production itself is one which creates a 'boundary space' or 'boundary experience' which can enable shared contributions to be understood and facilitated (Clark *et al*, 2017a). In this paper, ideas of co-production rested on notions of building on young people's capabilities and providing opportunities for them to recognise and develop their skills and use them in a process of 'negotiated activity', thus becoming agents for change, rather than passive recipients of services (Hatzidimitriadou *et al*, 2012).

Current evidence focussing on alcohol misuse and young people has tended to explore the relationship that young people have with alcohol and associated risky behaviours. This body of research has frequently situated young people as 'the problem', identifying that the outcomes of misuse and risky behaviour can be severe (Newbury-Birch, 2009; Jernigan, 2001; Donaldson, 2009), but rarely enabling their participation in finding solutions. Such evidence does not provide a clear intervention strategy, but highlights the complexity and changing nature of young people's drinking cultures over time, and the relationship of parents, peers and wider social contexts to their decision making processes (e.g. Bremner *et al*, 2011; Sondhi and Turner, 2011; Valentine *et al*, 2010; Velleman, 2009; Seaman and Ikegwuonu, 2010; Percy *et*

al, 2011; Atkinson *et al*, 2011). This points to the need for approaches to tackling alcohol misuse that go beyond individual health messages, towards interventions that can situate young people as sophisticated decision makers, within the range of contexts that they experience (Sondhi, 2012).

Building on this evidence base, the ‘Thinking Differently’ programme was developed by a consortia of funding bodies in Scotland, to stimulate a different approach. The programme was premised on the idea that alcohol misuse is better addressed by changing general attitudes to alcohol rather than (or, more likely, in addition to) targeting individuals who are individually vulnerable to alcohol misuse (Clark *et al*. 2017b). The programme trialled an innovative preventative community approach to young people and alcohol. It worked through three very different projects that recognised the more nuanced role of parents, peers, and the community in young people’s decision-making about alcohol consumption and attempted to regard young people as potential agents of change rather than as a problem to be fixed. The three projects were developed in collaboration with young people, and each focused on different processes and outcomes to tackle substance misuse. All three were required to meet two primary outcomes: reducing alcohol-related harm and associated risky behaviour by young people; and, building practical, sustainable skills and knowledge to empower young people, parents/carers and the community to take action to address local alcohol concerns. The definition of a young person was not prescribed and the projects worked with young people of various ages from primary school children through to their mid-twenties.

The evaluation

The programme, and the accompanying evaluation, took place over three years. Firstly, the evaluation team worked with the three projects to develop a theory of change (Dyson and Todd, 2010; Chen, 2015; Laing and Todd, 2015) for their work, based on the actions that young people had suggested, and decide on an evaluation strategy that was bespoke to each project. A theory of change approach to evaluation sets out how an action leads to a longer term change via a series of intermediate changes. Data can then be collected in order to support, or refute the theory. This approach works well for complex initiatives such as this, aimed at long-term community transformation, where actions are multi-stranded and there are no specific individual beneficiaries.

Firstly, these theories were developed without the input of young people. In the intervening time since the actions were decided, proposals written and accepted, and staff recruited, the young people that were originally involved had moved on and were for the large part, no longer involved with the projects. This meant that the theories of change needed to be developed in collaboration with staff and strategic leads of projects before other young people were recruited. Data collection was undertaken in order to build a portfolio of evidence for each project. The evidence was used to consider how far the theories of change were supported or refuted. The three projects themselves collected a wide variety of data relating to their work. This included: reports; observations; reflective diaries; visual data (photographs, artwork, video); audio data (adverts and radio shows); notes and minutes; evaluation sheets; and expenditure data. In addition to this data, the evaluation team collected evidence by means of regular interviews with project staff; interviews, observations and focus groups with young people participating in the projects; focus groups with groups defined as ‘activists’ or ‘action groups’ in each project; and diamond ranking exercises (Clark 2012; Clark et al 2013). The evaluation team worked with each project and reviewed their theories by drawing on this

portfolio of evidence and checked whether their theories still held and whether, in time, they were likely to meet their outcomes.

The Thinking Differently programme rested on the assumption that young people can be active participants in changing not just their own lives, but the lives of those around them including peers, families and communities. Co-production was a key aim of the projects, and they were expected to ensure that their work was ‘youth-led’ and participatory, and that young people were involved in design and delivery. Similarly, young people were given different opportunities to engage with the evaluation and this meant that rather than being ‘sampled’ they participated in ways of their choosing that were appropriate to them. Young people were very welcoming and accepting of the evaluators, and invited them to observe their activities, for example, a climbing wall activity, an animation workshop and a photography workshop. During the evaluation, the evaluation team tried to understand in what ways, and to what extent, young people wished to be involved in design, delivery and evaluation and facilitate this. Early on in the evaluation, the research team offered to work with any of the young people who were part of the three projects to enhance their skills in research, so that they had the capacity to undertake research themselves if they wanted to. This was an idea that was taken up by two groups of young people in two of the three projects and this paper reports on how those young people engaged with the evaluation team, the experiences of working with these young people, and reflects on the lessons that were learned. In that sense, they were not recruited to work with us, but rather were active in suggesting ways that they could learn about research in order to take action in their own communities and the evaluators responded by providing the opportunities for them to do so.

Co-producing research for change with young people

Young Researchers Research Day (Project 1)

Project 1 aimed to encourage young people to influence their local community. Their theory was, that by finding out the concerns of the local community and concentrating on addressing them, over time, the wider stressors associated with alcohol misuse would be reduced, and thus alcohol misuse could be tackled, almost by default. Young people were seen as key to understanding the needs and concerns of the local community and mobilising to address them. These young people were involved in a steering group (which also managed a youth café) and a youth activism group. The evaluation team developed strong relationships with these young people during the early months of the evaluation, and noted that they were very keen to become activists in their local community, and felt that engaging in a programme of work which involved them conducting some research within their own community would be a key activity for them. Project 1 staff devised a 12 week programme, including a boot-camp, where young people identified key issues relating to community health that they wanted to explore, research and develop key messages about. They identified the best ways to share those messages, to engage the local community, effect change, and increase their own involvement and contribution in positive activity within the local community.

As part of this process, eight young people (5 young women, 3 young men) from project 1 aged 13-17 were invited by the evaluation team to Newcastle University to take part in a day of activities aimed at increasing their research skills, and enabling them to undertake research in their own community. Through practical activities and discussion about the stereotypes of young people (a topic chosen by the young people themselves), young people explored aspects of research such as: what is research?; what is data?; how to ask a good research question;

interviewing and data recording techniques; making sense of data (sorting and coding) and identifying key messages; how to present key messages to others; and, diamond ranking. Part of the day also included a tour of the University, a meal, and a trip to a local funfair.

Young Researchers Research Residential (Project 2)

The evaluation team also worked closely with an action group in project 2, who were involved in making a film around alcohol awareness and responsible drinking. Project 2 focused on ways to influence peers and the role of peer relationships in respect of alcohol. The group made two films, with the help of a local film company, and the evaluators met up with them to spend a day working through how they could use those films to make a difference to other young people. Ideas included producing a learning resource to accompany the films that could be used to stimulate discussion in schools and youth groups. The young people realised, however, that they had no idea about how this might be received, or how best to go about this, and decided they wanted to conduct their own research with other young people and staff to discover how this might best work.

Following the success of the work with young people in project 1, the evaluation team invited members of the action group from project 2 to attend a weekend residential in Newcastle to learn more about research, and to work on planning their own piece of research to develop the learning materials. Four young women aged 16-18, and two project 2 staff members attended the weekend residential at Newcastle University, where they learned about: what research is; the role of a researcher; how to plan research; specific methodologies; and how to analyse and use the findings. During the weekend, the young people decided that they needed to conduct

research about what young people want in terms of alcohol education and they then planned a piece of work to undertake in schools using visual research methods. Alongside the research activities, the young people, staff and evaluators took part in a range of social activities including exploring the city, going for a meal, and a trip to a bowling alley.

Following this, the evaluators invited them to present at an academic conference and the young people presented about their experiences at the Youth Matters Conference held at the University in June 2016. It was thought that the young people may wish to contribute to a blog about their experiences, but instead, they decided to make a short film that illustrated the impact on them of working with academic researchers. This film was also shown at the conference, alongside a reel of visual images of the activities they had taken part in.

Findings: Exploring co-production with young people

Young people's experiences of participation

The evaluation of the young researcher sessions undertaken with young people from project 1 afterwards showed that the young people had enjoyed taking part (and some had even found it 'fun!');

I like the research task we done today, it was fun!

[The researchers] were lovely and helpful

I liked the research activities we took part in today ☺

I really enjoyed the ‘What’s in it for you?’ [exercise] as it was interesting to see other people’s opinions

The team observed that young people had really taken on board what they had learned, and were beginning to talk in a different way, sounding like researchers, using key terms with confidence such as ‘data’, ‘evidence’ ‘questions’ and ‘methods’:

It was interesting how easy it is to research things, and how to split the data into groups. (young person)

It was interesting, different ways of collecting evidence for research. (young person)

Evidence from the project subsequently demonstrated that five of the young people from project 1 had gone on to conduct research with approximately 60 community members about the use of e-cigs, had successfully developed key themes from that research and produced a radio show in order to disseminate their key messages into the community. The young people stressed that attending the research training day had enabled research to become more accessible to them and increased their capacity to undertake research within their own communities, which, it is theorised, might in time lead to greater engagement by the community in health concerns.

Feedback from the young people from project 2, who took part in the residential research training also showed that they enjoyed their experience and learned much:

When I went down to Newcastle, I did'nae have a clue about research – I thought I did – but I did'nae. When you asked us to get into it, I realised I would'nae have known where to start! And if I did start, we would'nae have got as far as we are now. (young person)

The four young people involved very much enjoyed the experiences they had, and appreciated the chance to make a difference by sharing their experiences from their own perspective with academic researchers. Although initially nervous about presenting at an academic conference, with support from the evaluation team they grew in confidence and felt a great sense of achievement at having presented in front of a whole room full of academics. Their contribution was noted by the organiser:

Having attended many conferences and events which focus upon the lives of young people I feel that one of the elements which made our event stand out was the inclusion of a youth presentation. The young people were able to present to a packed room of researchers, telling us what they feel are the most important elements to consider when undertaking research upon young people. Their presentation was articulate and, above all, funny. They added a unique element to our event. (Conference organiser)

The role of project staff in facilitating participation

The intention of the 'Thinking Differently' Programme was that the projects would be youth-led, but what this meant in practice was difficult to define, and open to interpretation. During the evaluation, project staff explained that in a 'ladder of participation' (e.g. Hart, 1992; Shier, 2001) levels of participation vary, and perhaps youth-led conjured up an image of being at the top of the rung:

I suppose if we say the term ‘youth-led’ it conjures up to me that young people have come up with the idea and they’re steering it.

To me, it’s the top stage of that... whereas youth participation is a process.

Nevertheless, staff often felt that young people did not have the skills or the desire to help in the running of a project, and the projects instead aimed to ensure that young people were enabled to participate at whatever level suited them, rather than expecting young people to ‘lead’. Much was based around the relationships and trust the young people built:

I think, sometimes people assume that youth led, like young people come up with other ideas themselves, and have the skills and the knowledge ability. It’s a load of nonsense, but what they do do is they come and they pick up from the adults who don’t force things down their throat, they just explore things with them, come up with ideas and explain things... (project co-ordinator)

As young people developed these skills, they were able to act as peer supporters for others. This had to be done slowly and was driven by the needs of the young people:

Given that we’re targeting the people who are not traditionally involved in participation, we have come to accept that it is going to take some time before we progress along those stages, and that our expectations, even if the young people want to be at that top youth-led, is going to take time. (project co-ordinator)

Project staff recognised that, without the necessary skills and confidence, young people might not always be best placed to make decisions at certain points in project development, and an

element of risk could be introduced if young people were not completely ready. Staff felt that it was more appropriate for them to be constantly questioning young people about their needs, and how they could best be supported. This approach was described thus:

It's a participation journey that has the ultimate goal of being youth led, and that participation is at various strands, and it supports young people who want that aspiration to reach that goal, but also support for them while they can dip in and out of the participation.

Some project staff however struggled to move away from notions of the young people they were working with as service users or beneficiaries. Indeed, while planning one of the research sessions, one staff member expressed concern that the young people would find it too hard, or not be able to contribute. After reassurance from the evaluation team, they nevertheless took part, and staff were surprised but pleased by how well the young people engaged with the research.

The importance of shared values

During diamond ranking exercises (rankings of nine statements in order of preference, see, e.g. Clark, 2012, carried out by the research team with the young people, young people demonstrated their desire to have their voices heard. Some young people wanted to change their communities and help others. Their own development was seen as important in the process, but was secondary to wanting to make a difference to others. Identical diamond ranks completed by staff members indicated that the main aim of the staff was to ensure benefit for the young people from participation, rather than enabling them to make a difference to others. This mismatch in the aims of working together was a surprise to staff when it was discussed,

and hearing young people's views enabled them to be much more supportive in facilitating the young people to become more active in stimulating change. Young people expressed their desire to be active in making a difference:

I think it's the best reason that I want to help young people make positive choices so we can live in a better environment

I'd feel more important knowing that I had made a difference in someone's life

Project co-ordinators and young people themselves frequently told us that young people have the ability and desire to get involved, but that they want to be involved in different ways and on different levels, that they choose. It often depends on how interested they are in the topic being addressed, and the agency they feel to make a difference:

... unless they really, really care about the issue or feel they can make a change, they will only get so far. (project co-ordinator)

Learning how to communicate these different desires and values was crucial to enabling them to be shared. Having shared values enabled activities and opportunities to be more relevant and interesting to young people.

The Thinking Differently programme intended to reduce consumption of alcohol by young people, and to increase community capacity (in terms of young people, parents and the wider community) to begin to address issues with alcohol misuse in their areas. While a laudable aim, the encouragement given to projects in the early months to 'think differently' about how to tackle this, and to target ordinary members of the communities for the initial work, led to

tensions in whether, and how explicitly, projects identified themselves as ‘an alcohol project’. Traditionally, many projects badged as alcohol projects seek to work with people already misusing, or at risk of misusing, alcohol in some way in order to address their drinking at an individual level. However, the projects sought to address the underlying societal *causes* of drinking, rather than the *symptoms*, and aimed for wider cultural change. In project 3 this meant working with normative groups of young people and parents to tackle the everyday messages about alcohol that portray alcohol misuse in a glamorous, or socially acceptable way. In project 2, community development work was aimed at enabling the community to identify and tackle the underlying causes of alcohol misuse in their area, such as the lack of facilities for young people. In project 2, targeted groupwork was intended to bring together resilient young people and those young people at risk of misusing alcohol to challenge attitudes in peers. As such, although alcohol was central to the activities, these projects did not seek to position the young people they work with as ‘a problem’:

The young people and the older people that we’re engaging with, this isn’t an intervention for them, it’s not a service to them. In a way we’re facilitating them becoming community activists, and therefore, actually, we don’t have a right to ask about their personal lifestyle (project co-ordinator)

The evaluation found that talking about drinking can potentially harm young people’s trust in adults, especially if young people suspect an ulterior motive. In project 1, staff made it very clear that the project aimed at enabling young people to influence adults, and were thus more successful in introducing alcohol as a theme with young people:

... it came from young people [who said] ‘We want to change the culture, and the way we think we can change the culture is by us telling adults’. (project co-ordinator)

In project 2, where a more traditional model of groupwork was undertaken, with issues-based work (including alcohol, but not excluding other topics of concern) happening alongside leisure activities to sustain engagement, the theory was that young people would challenge each other around alcohol use through positive relationships with their peers. Because the young people were not selected for the groupwork based on their alcohol use or misuse (and indeed on questioning, made little use of alcohol), young people struggled to see the relevance of conversations about alcohol in their sessions. This led to a refocusing of the project, so that young people were first supported to gain the skills needed to mentor other young people, so that they did not need to see alcohol as of relevance to themselves, but to their peers, and young people and society more generally. This shift in focus may well have facilitated young people in being drivers of change, rather than recipients.

Valuing knowledge exchange

The co-production approach throughout the programme and the evaluation was a fundamental thread which it was hoped would facilitate and explore new forms of knowledge, values, and social relations that emerged out of the co-productive processes. The Thinking Differently programme was complex, and the dynamic nature of the projects and interactions between the young people and the project (and the researchers), demanded an innovative approach. The evaluation team steered away from a traditional model of doing research ‘to’ and was explicit about these values from the beginning. Young people and their experiences were key and the team was keen to maintain a co-productive process in the evaluation. There are a range of ways in which young people can be involved in evaluation, ranging from participant to researcher

(Alderson, 1995; Flutter and Ruddock, 2004; Kirby, 2001). Historically, the extent of their involvement very much varies depending on a number of factors, such as the experience and ethos of the adult researchers, the availability of resources to engage young people effectively, and the willingness and ability of young people themselves to engage and participate. Not all young people will find evaluation interesting or relevant to them, and evaluation is not necessarily seen as a 'fun' activity, as one project worker noted:

The focus of the boot camp was data generation and research which are not traditionally thought of as being fun activities.

However, when a topic is relevant to young people, they often want their views to be heard, and will engage at a level that suits them, given the right opportunities. It was always the intention of the evaluation team to involve young people *actively* in the evaluation wherever possible. Not all of the engagement with young people during the evaluation could be thought of as co-production, but where young people had different choices and opportunities to engage with the evaluation, and chose to do so, co-production was possible.

Discussion

The experiences of the evaluation team in working with young people to enhance their capacity to engage in research in their own communities provided evidence that young people have the desire to make a difference in their own communities, have the capacity to develop the necessary skills and competencies, and can make a valuable contribution to stimulating longer-

term transformational change in respect of alcohol misuse. The evaluation team identified several clear messages by involving the young people co-productively in the evaluation:

- a) Reciprocity and shared values are important
- b) Values and aims can be made explicit by effective communication
- c) Relationships matter
- d) Young people can, and want to, make a societal contribution.

In any project of this nature, the place of young people needs to be carefully considered and the rationale behind their involvement needs to be made explicit (Clark et al., 2015). There is also a need to be reflexive and recognise that it is not always appropriate to involve *all* young people and *all* aspects of research at *all* times. Nor is this always possible, theoretically or practically. In order to facilitate contributions, the evaluation team were able to offer opportunities so that the research the young people undertook was relevant to them, rooted in their own ideas, and based on their own self-identified needs and questions. The active nature of their engagement with us for the research day and residential activity could not therefore be described as recruitment (in the way we normally talk about engaging people for research), but rather emerged through a process of relationship building and dialogue. Throughout, the evaluation team tried to develop an ethos of partnership and co-production with the young people and project staff. The team paid attention to the expectations, interests, and concerns of the participants involved in the research. The team were keen to avoid ‘extraction’ of knowledge from the community to the benefit of the researchers and funders or that the communities were left unchanged or worse off than they were before. Ultimately the team endeavored to maximise the mutual benefits of working co-productively, especially with regards to the young people in the project. There is a growing theoretical curiosity in health

research literature about reciprocity and trust as fundamental health promoting factors that are usually understood in terms of ‘social capital’ on the community level (Portes, 1998).

Engaging young people, families and communities was a crucial part of all of the projects’ theories of change. Without engagement, working towards outcomes was compromised. The projects had different strategies for engagement and learned that where there were existing relationships and a good reputation, and strong partnerships (with a similar ethos) engagement was easier and quicker. The evaluation team also took the time to get to know the young people and supported them, recognising the value and time taken to develop relationships based on trust. Travelling and visiting Newcastle (and being away from home) was seen as a benefit by the young people. This, interspersed with social activities and a sense of purpose, and gaining skills, empowered them so that it was they themselves that could make a difference, not the evaluation team as ‘experts’. A significant achievement was when the young people presented at the conference. This challenged usual academic power relationships. The young people became the ‘experts’ when speaking about their own experiences and this in turn gave them confidence in their own ideas as valuable. This was reported as empowering by both the young people themselves and the project workers.

The research groups undertaken by the young people with the evaluation team, acted as ‘boundary experiences’ (Clark *et al*, 2017a). They were not provided alongside a toolkit, or presented as research training, but rather were flexible spaces whereby young people could share their ambitions, their existing knowledge and their skills gaps, and the researchers could respond with relevant information and knowledge. This two-way reciprocal interchange of ideas and activity enabled an understanding of the perspectives of those that participated, and shared values to emerge: an ethos of discovery rather than one of delivery or deficit. Social

activities also cemented relationships and made the engagement fun. The involvement of the evaluation team in such co-productive activity with the young people posed a challenge to some project workers, who had not previously viewed the young people as capable agents of change. They were genuine in wanting the young people to benefit from the activities they participated in, but did not always see the bigger picture of how those young people could contribute to benefitting others.

Concluding remarks

Findings from the evaluation indicate that by ‘thinking differently’, young people can become a community asset to change the culture around alcohol use (Clark *et al.* 2017b). This is a different path to take from traditional interventions aimed at addressing youth alcohol misuse. Nevertheless, moving from deficit notions of young people as ‘problem’, as ‘risk’, or as ‘in need’ (of intervention), towards notions of young people as agents of change in their own communities is not easy. An attempt was made during this evaluation, very much due to the ethos of the evaluators and the project designers who had a view of young people as capable, and having valuable skills and knowledge. Young people were further supported by being involved in research that was relevant to them, and drew on their own ideas and questions. This involvement had a specific purpose with the intention of facilitating change to happen.

The evaluators built strong, trusting relationships over time with the young people, and were able to be flexible and offer a variety of opportunities to engage, in ways that were fun and attractive to young people, but that did not shy away from being challenging. The evaluators concluded that young people can be effective researchers in order to stimulate change in their

own communities, but challenge notions of formal research training or toolkits as sufficient, advocating rather an approach that incorporates knowledge exchange, reciprocity and co-production that can empower and value young people. Certainly, moving forward, embedding approaches to involving young people in research and evaluation that place emphasis on dialogue and relationship building before the research design phase, may enable young people to be more active collaborators, rather than passive participants in the process.

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