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## Abstract

In this case study, I explore the ways youth, as a liminal, in-between space between childhood and adulthood, can be explored by researchers who want to know more about young people's politics, that is, the ways young people construct their own politics, and political subjectivities, as they make transitions to adulthood. I argue that by using creative methods to explore young people's everyday lives, researchers can empower young people's expertise in their own lives. The primary goal of the method is to step beyond the question of engagement, which is the hegemonic approach to young politics of our time. This method intends to open the research site to young people's politics in their words and on their terms. The method also encourages participants to subvert, transgress, and "remix" the method itself.

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## Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Outline a creative method of their own for talking about politics with young people
  - Explain why "talking politics" with young people can be so tricky and how creative methods, such as digital photography, can help qualitative researchers generate deeper conversations
  - Appraise digital photography as a creative stimulus for focus group research
  - Design and develop qualitative methods that are informed by young people's marginalization from politics and political institutions in our time
  - Use and justify the use of research methods that welcome young people's co-ownership of the method, including their subversion of the rules of the research site
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This method is designed to build a relationship with young participants, in which they are empowered to take some ownership of the method, adopt it, adapt it, and subvert it. The method's rules are made to be broken. In the same way, I hope this case study can build a relationship with you, the reader, as you take my case study and build your own method. Please remix this method and make it your own.

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## The Question of Engagement

Your first task in this method is to think about your own position. Research is a journey, and in this method, your journey is to learn from young people's expertise and experiences. Your participants are unlikely to take you in the direction you planned. If you hope, and are able, to explore new and unexpected things, this method should suit you.

This method is for talking to young people about their everyday lives in a way that explores politics using their

own expertise and in their own words: the opportunities and challenges they face, the ways they build their identities and belongings, and so forth. This may sound simple, but the approach is radical. We have very few methods for examining young people's everyday lives as political arenas (Kallio & Häkli, 2011). We tend either to work on their engagement with adult institutions, adult hierarchies, and adults in power or to study their disengagement from those institutions and power relationships. We identify those powerful institutions and people as "political." Doing so, we exclude young people from that term and young people's lives from having presence in the political sphere.

Shakuntala Banaji (2008) wrote that the question of whether young people were engaged or disengaged with politics became a mantra through the 1990s to 2000s (p. 543) to the point that it was unthinkable not to pose it when working with or researching young people's politics. Helen Haste and Amy Hogan (2006) explained that, most of all, we lament young people as politically deficient, as a democratic issue to be solved, and a problem in terms of their abstention from elections. In the years following the financial crisis and, in the United Kingdom, the crushing period of austerity, the idea that young people pose an incipient crisis for democracy because of the issue of their disengagement (Farthing, 2010) became attached to neoliberal arguments about what youth—as a period of transition to adulthood—is and the correct role of young people in our democratic society. Young people are not just lamented as non-voters but as moral, social, and civic failures. Engagement is the word that combines two ideas. First, that young people's politics is a question of how young people can conform to adult institutions and hierarchies, and second, that young people are generally found to be deficient and that to their political absence is attached at best disappointment and, at worst, stigma and abjection.

The title of this case study includes a word, remix, which is a familiar term in popular culture but deserves a definition. The remix is about co-creation. Welcome young participants as they adapt the method, remix its tasks to their needs, subvert its rules, and, in so doing, take collaborative authorship of the method and the data generated. Sarah Pink (2001) writes that creative methods need to be context-specific: "creatively developed within individual projects" (p. 4). Enable your participants to share their voice in a creative way and on their own terms (O'Toole et al., 2010; Valentine, 1999).

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## Research Design

Young people live at the threshold between childhood dependence and adult independence. They are undertaking transitions to adulthood. Their borderline, or liminal, status between childhood and adulthood means that young people also stand on the threshold of a permeable public/private divide. Young people do politics in ways that take advantage of that divide (Manning, 2012, p. 2). I needed my research method to target the border between the personal and the political. I needed young participants to sense that I respected their expertise in the places they lived and the experiences they had and not feel that I was merely testing their engagement with (or disengagement from) adult-led political institutions such as the vote.

I also needed my method to avoid the sledgehammer effect the word "politics" can have on any discussion,

and especially, discussions with young people, if it is understood to mean the politics of politicians, elite institutions, parliamentary debate, and so forth. Traditional politics research methods that focus on political arenas that are “led and defined explicitly by adults” fail to approach young people’s politics as the “complex and multivalent struggle” (Staeheli & Kofman, 2004, p. 3) that young people undertake as apprentice members to those public arenas, “where common issues are deliberated by [adult] representatives and politicians” (Kallio & Häkli, 2011, p. 4) and where elite adults engage in what Rancière (1996) calls “the activities which create order by distributing places, names, functions” (p. 173).

Seeking access to the liminal space of youth drew me toward “respondent-led” (Marsh, O’Toole, & Jones, 2007, p. 60) work and a focus on the everyday and its “ways of operating, of doing things” (de Certeau, 1984, p. XI). I wanted to explore “how everyday life can also operate as an arena for the contestations and transformation of dominant, often oppressive modalities of citizenship” (Dickinson, Andrucki, Rawlins, Hale, & Cook, 2008, p. 105) and build a “more nuanced understanding of the relationship between [young people’s] lived experiences and their engagement and interest in politics” (Marsh et al., 2007, p. 212) that understood young people to be embedded within adult-controlled spaces yet possessing political agency in various resourceful and tactical ways (Wood, 2011).

To build my method, I followed this series of tasks:

1. Identify a topic in everyday life

As Dickinson et al. (2008) put it, everyday life is political. In their everyday lives, young people experience conflicts, build communities, craft their own identities, and take action in endless ways. I was interested in the politics of everyday life. My aim was to give young people a conversation topic, a “stimulus material,” and a task to complete (Punch, 2002).

After reviewing several options, the topic I decided on was “the place where I live.” This approach is common in the social sciences (see, for example, Ekström, 2016; Harris, Wyn, & Younes, 2007; Leyshon & Bull, 2011; Riley, Griffin, & Morey, 2010; Wood, 2014). I prepared two stimulus questions, which were “a place you are proud of” and “a place you think should be improved.” These were intended to motivate participants to think about the issues, communities, challenges, and sense of belonging in the places where they lived.

2. Develop a task-based approach to the topic

A task-based approach does two things. First, it turns the research project into an approachable (and, ideally, enjoyable) exercise with clear objectives and a transparent process. Second, it does what, in plain English, you might call breaking the ice: the task should relieve the pressure of direct questioning, release young participants from the sense that they are being quizzed by a powerful adult in search of correct answers, and recognize young participants as having valuable and diverse skills. In this project, the task I chose was photography. I planned to ask participants to take photographs that answered questions based on my selected topic, which were “take a picture of something you’re proud of where you live,”

“take a picture of something that could be improved,” and “if you could take one picture and show it to the Prime Minister, what would you take a picture of and what would you say.”

You should find your own task that suits your skills and interests, just as you should find your own topic. You could record soundscapes (Dubois, Guastavino, & Raimbault, 2006; Levack Drever, 2002), you could use a modeling substrate such as Lego (Buckingham, 2009) or invite young people to take you on a guided tour (Leyshon & Bull, 2011). You may find it appropriate to have several tasks. Indeed, in my PhD fieldwork (Bowman, 2016), which provides the sample case in this case, I provided three tasks. The first was a card-sorting exercise using cartoon drawings that symbolized issues or problems (White, 2011); the second was the photography task, which was inspired by the work of Bronwyn E. Wood (2011); and the third was the focus group session in which young people were tasked with guiding the researcher, and their fellow participants, through the photos they had taken.

### 3. Prepare for data generation

Once you know your topic and have chosen your tasks, it is time to plan the process of generating data. I knew I would have to take out a notebook and turn on my audio recorders. So, I organized digital audio recorders from my university library and stocked up on pens. I tested all my equipment. I put together a flexible interview structure with some guiding questions, so that I could fall back on them if I got flustered or confused in a bustling, energetic discussion. I planned to take field notes on the things that were not able to be recorded by the audio recorder, such as body language and a subjective sense of the room: how it felt, how the participants interacted emotionally, and so forth.

With that idea of expertise alive in the conversation, I planned to introduce the photography project. I prepared the digital cameras, which I provided, and I wrote a short script in which I explained a little about the restrictions of the project. I formulated a talk about the ethics of photography in public. I wanted my participants to feel like expert researchers, investigating their own everyday lives.

### 4. Prepare for young co-creation by remix

In this method, you should seek to put young people in charge of what they say and in as much control of the research site as possible. After all, your research site is also a place where young people's politics occurs, as your participants navigate what is allowed and not allowed, where power lies and who is marginalized, and so forth, in their relationships with other participants, with gatekeepers, and with you as the researcher. It is appropriate, of course, to study these politics as they occur. I chose to do this in a few ways, but you will have your own approach. I allowed my participants to choose their own pseudonyms for the research project and talked through their decisions with them. I took notes on their interactions with each other and with me. These are valuable opportunities to learn from young people.

The way I suggest you can maximize young people's control of the research site is with a remix approach. A remix is about taking what a person or group has produced and mixing it up into a new product. It is not a million miles away from the traditional idea of a bricolage (Kincheloe, 2005; Leyshon & Bull, 2011). You and your participants share a material reality but perceive it in your own individual and co-constructed ways. Reality is complicated, so you can welcome the complex ways that people make sense of it, individually and together, by letting them use their own tools and their own approaches to do so. You and your participants share the process. You and your participants are simultaneously learning and teaching, listening and speaking, and creating ideas and receiving ideas (Burwell, 2012).

These are high-minded ideas, but how does one prepare for collaborative work? I prepared by studying—and practicing—the skills of strategic questioning, which is a classic approach to building conversations, frequently used among activists, and written in its most familiar format by Fran Peavey (1995). Peavey's framework and process for the approach is very popular and freely available in many places online. I kept my mind open to interventions from participants. I brought a great deal of spare materials, of which my favorite are an extensive set of colored pens and pencils in a canvas roll, and several stacks of multicolored sticky notes and distributed them at any point when participants began to develop an independent line of inquiry together, so that they could co-create and share networks of ideas on their table or on the walls of their workspace. In your project, it may be practicable to bring participants in at the point when you are analyzing your data to co-create and remix your codes of analysis and your conclusions.

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## Research Practicalities

Once my plan was in order, I set about the practical issues of picking sites and recruiting participants. This method is best suited to relatively limited numbers of participants, and qualitative study that can generate “deep” descriptive data. Rather than trying to produce a testable hypothesis or a large, encompassing model, I wanted to address my data in terms of their dependability, rigor, and consistency. In other words, I wanted to embrace the strengths of the method to talk to a few young people in great depth and to explore that depth. I established some diversity among my participants by selecting case study locations that varied: a town college, a city youth center, and a rural school. These “provide the safest and most suitable venues for interviews” (Masson, 2004, p. 46). Almost all will have adult gatekeepers who can help you recruit participants and support your access to the research site. At each site, I asked the gatekeeper—the teacher, tutor, or youth worker—to help me find a small group of 4-5 young people who could participate. I asked specifically for participants who knew each other and, ideally, who were friends. I wanted participants to be able to support each other and build each other's confidence. To some extent, I wanted them to be able to gang up on me, too, that is, to be able to counterbalance some of the power that I, as the researcher, held at the research site by social interaction between each other as a group of friends.

There is a rich and detailed literature on work with young people to which I would add the important concern of voice and power. Put yourself in a position of learning. Do not simply record and interpret young people's testimonies of their lives. Be mindful of their power. Learn from them. In the same way that you would enter the office of a diplomat to the United Nations Security Council to share their expertise or that you would respect the oral histories of elderly participants in ethnographic research, pay attention to young people as political agents.

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## Method in Action

In action, I found this method to be a powerful tool for building the conversation as a deliberative space in which young people could share their expertise, their opinions, and their political experiences. As noted above, I began my research with the theoretical perspective that young people are marginalized, and that motivated me in the research site to be welcoming and supportive. I was politically aligned, myself, to counteract intersecting sociopolitical inequalities that made my voice more powerful, my presence more legitimate, and my opinions of more consequence. My first action in the method was always to make this explicit. I prepared and used phrases such as "I am interested in your opinion," "You are experts in your own life, and I am grateful that you will let me share that expertise," and

Honestly, in a perfect world, for me, I wouldn't talk at all, I would just listen. But I also want to support you and make you feel able to talk, so I might pop into the conversation with a question here and there, or to raise up a topic you're talking about for the rest of us in the group.

I found participants eager to share and enthusiastic about working with each other. I was thrilled, and honored, to learn from young people about topics from local histories passed down by parents and grandparents, to the challenges of finding a home as a young single mother, to everyday issues such as the police practice of stopping and searching young men racialized as Black. I encourage the reader to treat young interlocutors with respect and to share your equality with them as much as you can, including your youngest participants. It will not be surprising that not all voices are equal at the research site. You will find participants who are more confident than others in their own voice and opinions. To some extent, a small group can help with this. You can also, with great care, support your participants who may feel sidelined by the rest of the group. I recall working with a large group of young people, among whom were a small group of young mothers. In my research process, I split the group into smaller groups and noticed that the young women banded together somewhat. Their discussion as a smaller, more familiar group allowed young mothers to share experiences of, for instance, supporting a family on low income while also studying, rather easier than in the group discussion, where their voices were shouted out by others.

I include a few of the opportunities when I was able to let young people take action and remix the research method. First, at one site, a youth group I worked with turned out to have a whole day's session free for the young people with no activity planned. It was a sunny and clement day, and the participants in the group were eager to go outside, so I rejigged the photo approach. We all went out on a tour of the local area, and

participants took photographs, sharing a camera between them. In another, although I had asked for a small group of 4-5 students, the college provided me two whole classes, with a total number of 23 participants. They were extremely enthusiastic, not least because they were all able to get extra credit on the course for participating. I had—handily—brought along plenty of spare materials and audio recorders, and so in each class, I allowed the participants to split themselves into smaller groups and build up to a broader, whole class discussion.

Practically speaking, these interventions and transgressions will be a challenge for you, as a researcher, who has prepared your methodology and underpinning theoretical philosophies to suit a particular approach. My leading philosophy was the remix, so in each case, I let the participants know, in clear speech, my disposition toward their transgressions. Such adaptations will be a challenge to you. You will have to think on your feet, but unexpected opportunities will present themselves if you do. At one site, I ended up with many small groups and had to “float” from group to group around the room. As it turned out, this gave me the opportunity to study how young people talked when I was not at the table listening. It was when I was not present, and when young women participants were in control of their own small group, that they talked about young motherhood. My absence, in other words, was not part of my plan, but the remix approach which allowed young people to seize control of research yielded useful results.

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## Practical Lessons Learned

There is a wealth of literature on qualitative approaches, creative methods, focus groups, and so forth. I have contributed, in this document, to your learning by talking you through my experience of a remix method for working with young people. My goal, in this section, is to provide a simple and accessible advisory list. What were the biggest lessons I learned in my research? As you take this method and remix it to make your own, what advice can I give?

1. Don't just expect the unexpected. Prepare for it

Most guides to semi-structured interviewing and to focus group research will explain how to put together an interview script. I suggest you also prepare for unexpected, serendipitous transgressions from the interview. You can prepare by thinking through things that might possibly happen, but you can never cover every possibility.

I strongly recommend picking an approach like Fran Peavey's strategic questioning, reading up on it, and practicing it like you would practice a musical instrument or a beloved hobby. I practiced strategic questioning with friends and family, as well as with students in my classroom, before I embarked on my research. Through practice, a skill like strategic questioning will become second nature to you.

2. Your audio recorder and your notebook work best when they work together

Unexpected things will happen, and one way to be prepared is to have an audio recorder you



can trust. Test, test, and re-test it before you take it into action. If you can trust it to record the things that are said in the group, then you can use a notebook to record other things, such as body language, notes on how your participants laugh or make jokes together, or the whole universe of interactions and feelings you will share and experience at your research site. You will find your own approach to taking notes.

A tip that is rarely written but is frequently shared, among researchers: never, ever switch off your audio recorder until the last participant has left the room. This advice is meant literally. Do not switch off the recorder until everyone has gone. You will almost certainly find participants talk after the session has ended. If your recorder is off, you will lose anything they say. I have learned a great deal from participants that I was able to give full inclusion because the audio recorder is on. The important thing is to remain clear and respectful of their privacy. If a participant speaks after the end of the session, what I say is this:

Thank you for sharing that with me. I would really like to include what you said in my research. I didn't switch off my audio recorder yet, so would it be OK if I included what you said as part of the session?

### 3. Remix everything

It is the traditional, and familiar, approach of researchers in qualitative work to ask participants to stick themselves in static, pre-defined categories that the researcher has defined already. For instance, to provide a piece of paper with boxes that say Male, Female, Black, White, and so forth. It is traditional, and familiar, to encode all the participants in a piece of research according to static pseudonyms defined by the researcher, such as A1, A2, and so forth.

I did not do this. I gave a piece of paper that was entitled "Current Status," instead. I invited participants to fill it out, but I didn't require it: the paper said, "This section is so I know a bit more about you. It is all optional—you can fill it in or not. You can also fill some parts in and leave others." I left blank spaces for "age," "gender," "background/ethnicity," and "optional: current status (e.g. school year, employment, college course?)." I also explained to participants why I had included those criteria. I said,

I would like to compare what we talk about to other research with young people, and in other research, young people are usually put into categories along these terms. But I'm not interested in these terms so much as your own experiences and your own feelings, so, for instance, I've written "background/ethnicity" but not a checkbox, because it's about what you would like me to know about how you think about yourself. It's up to you and if you want to write in these boxes you can.

Along with the current status card, I also invited participants to pick a pseudonym, which was a fun way to extend young people's control of their own presence in the research (Gallagher,

2008). I reminded them not to use pseudonyms that they already used offline or online, like a screen name.

I strongly advise such a course of action. In so doing, I found these boxes a source of rich and useful data in themselves. Some participants chose not to fill in boxes. Others took the opportunity to talk about things about themselves they were proud of, or felt would be useful to know about themselves.

One thing I did not do, and which I wish I had done, was be similarly up front about who I was. My piece of paper allowed participants the freedom to explain their own background, but I let my background be explained to participants by unspoken language of power and privilege. I was invited to work with young people in a youth group where none of my participants racialized themselves as White. But I never racialized myself to the group, at least not in an honest and equal way. I let my presence as a visibly White, male, university researcher, be an unspoken “current status” card. I did explain to the participants that I was a researcher, but in retrospect, it would have been interesting and respectful to fill out one of the cards myself for each group. I wonder at the lost opportunity for remix, too. What if participants had been able to draw up their own “current status” card, and what about my current status would they have wanted to know from me? The research project you undertake will teach you things, and sharing spaces with young people will be a source of lessons to you too.

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## Conclusion

I conclude by returning to my introductory statement, which was that I wanted to build a relationship with the reader. I am a communicator by trade. I studied languages, but most of all, I studied talking. I remember all my jobs as talking jobs. I remember 6 years as a bartender mostly as a series of conversations with colleagues and customers. I worked hitting rivets into aircraft parts at a factory in England, and I remember the ka-chunk of the hammer, but most of all, the chat with my colleagues on the production line. I worked in youth engagement too, and as a researcher, my experience with young people has been just the same. Young people speak to us about their expertise, about their experiences, and about what they believe in. They share what is beautiful and worthwhile in life, and what they want to build, as individuals and as members of communities. Too often, we are not listening, and most of all, we do not offer the spaces of equal and worthwhile conversation that we provide to adults.

My method intended to provide, with a systematic and rigorous procedure, a conceptual space in which young people could feel not only legitimate as speakers but also autonomous as actors in control of the space and of their discussion. I did not turn up much data about elections, which made me happy. As a student of politics, failing to discover anything about the one most familiar indicator of young political activity was exciting. It suggested that my voice, my language, and my interests were unimportant in the research space. My first conclusion is that future researchers should test for the unexpected and celebrate it when it occurs. In this

explorative method, the unexpected is a good sign you are truly exploring unfamiliar territory.

I enjoyed the photographic method, and my participants did too. They seized upon it. It was familiar to them. There were hints of transgression which I, bound by my ethical procedure, could not study. For instance, one friendship group of young women in my study used the cameras to take copious selfies. I had promised to exclude any photos that identified participants, though, and so then stories they told with these photos remained their own. Another participant asked if he could take the photos in collaboration with a good friend who was not part of the project. My ethical forms did not allow this, and I stayed true to them. His interactions with his friend were important to him, but this transgression was, unfortunately, unwelcome. I conclude, for the reader, that some rules probably cannot be broken in your case, either. Be totally clear on the rules that cannot be broken and do not let the unbreakable rules yield an inch. Your task, and your ethical procedures, can provide the boundaries within which young people feel free to act creatively. This is one of my findings, and I hope future work can explore the role of adult-imposed boundaries and their ability to legitimize young creativity.

I suggest several opportunities to push your exploration further and to challenge this method to its limit. First, involve, as much as possible, your participants in your coding process. This might require a small number of participants and is likely to need a willing gatekeeper. Perhaps a cut-and-paste session in which participants undertake the task of coding their own quotes themselves would be interesting. Second, we frequently consider young people a monolithic group rather than a collective noun for many different transitions to adulthood. Make sure you know there are young women who consider themselves Jamaican, young people who self-identify most of all as Mancunian, and so forth. Perhaps build this diversity into your method. Third, I identify the potential in this method to further develop the research space as one that not only gives young people a voice but also power. Could you use your research to support young people's activism in their everyday life? Could your task be based on finding a way that your expertise and power as a researcher can support young people's action?

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## Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. Think of your own creative task to start participants talking about their everyday lives. Plan out the practicalities of your method. For example, what materials will it require? How much will they cost? How much time will it need? Will participants need to be provided training?
2. Acquire a copy of Fran Peavey's approach to strategic questioning. A link to one copy is provided in the "Web Resources" of this study. Write down a set of questions using this approach. Then, find a friend, family member, or colleague who is happy to tell you a story from their lives. Use strategic questioning to explore their experiences.
3. In a group, let each member take a moment to think of a village, town, or city they are familiar with. What places, there are places where young people hang out? These should be places where young people can talk to each other, have arguments, spend free time, enjoy each

other's company, and all the other important activities that people do in a free society. In the group, write down a selection of these places and discuss what would make young people feel at home there. Next, imagine that you are an adult kicking young people out of a place where they hang out. Which formal or informal reasons or prejudices would lead an adult to evict young people from this place? Which job or role might an adult be fulfilling that would give them formal or informal authority to do so? What might they say as they kicked young people out of the place? Consider writing a fictional dialogue in which an adult kicks young people out of a place they are spending recreational time.

4. Discuss, as a group, what you would like to see improved about the place where you live, and the channels and opportunities available to you to try and get those improvements put in place. Next, talk about how those opportunities are different for young people. How can young people get improvements made to the places where they live?
5. Think of election day. We usually think of the politics of elections in terms of numbers. Instead, discuss the emotion of the day. Do you feel excited? Bored? Disappointed? How could you research those emotions among young people who are voting for the first time?

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## Further Reading

**Bowman, B.** (2016). *"They don't know what's going on": Exploring young people's political subjectivities during transitions to adulthood in the UK* (PhD thesis). University of Bath, Bath, UK.

**Leyshon, M., & Bull, J.** (2011). The bricolage of the here: Young people's narratives of identity in the countryside. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 12, 159–180.

**Wood, B. E.** (2014). Researching the everyday: Young people's experiences and expressions of citizenship. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 27, 214–232.

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## Web Resources

"Strategic Questioning Manual" by Fran Peavey: <http://www.humanecology.com.au/StrategicQuest.pdf>

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