CONCEPTUAL ISSUES IN ASSESSING WHETHER PERSONALITY CAN CHANGE

TODD F. HEATHERTON and PATRICIA A. NICHOLS

Can personality change? This question has absorbed psychologists since William James first proposed that personality was set “in plaster” by early adulthood (James, 1890; see also McCrae & Costa, 1990). Not all psychologists have agreed with James’s assertion of stability. For instance, Erikson (1950) cogently argued that adults, just like children, mature and change as they go through life’s stages (see also Vaillant, 1977). Likewise, one of the basic assumptions of clinical psychology is that individuals are able to make important changes in many aspects of their lives. At the extreme, some have even proposed that personality may be so malleable that it changes from situation to situation (Mischel, 1968). More recently, personality psychologists have argued both that basic personality traits tend to be relatively stable over the life course (Caspi & Herbener, 1990; Costa & McCrae, 1980) and that personality goes through maturational changes and adaptations (Helson & Moane, 1987; Ozer & Gjerde, 1989). This volume explores multiple perspectives on the issue of whether personality can change.
Whether personality can change is arguably one of the most important and interesting questions facing contemporary personality psychologists. An examination of the issue reveals a wide array of intriguing questions, such as those related to the definition and measurement of personality, the normal developmental course of personality through the life span, the nature of psychological change, and the question of volitional control over the self. In this chapter we introduce some of the complex issues that need to be addressed in understanding the stability or malleability of personality.

WHY SHOULD PERSONALITY BE STABLE OR MALLEABLE?

From a functional perspective, why should personality be either stable or malleable? Cogent arguments can be provided both for why individuals should remain stable and why they should be able to change. To say that we understand someone's personality, that we understand them as a person, is to say that there is some degree of stability in their actions and mannerisms. Indeed, most definitions of personality invoke some notion of enduring characteristics and temperamental styles. In our interactions with others, we want them to be stable across time and across situations. We want to be able to predict their behavior, and we want to be able to rely on them to usually behave according to our expectations. When we choose partners for long-term relationships, we are essentially hoping that the person we choose to be with today will be the same person in the future (or at least that he or she will change in predictable and logical ways). We also wish to have some sense of coherence in our own self-understanding. To feel as if we are the same person today as we were yesterday helps us cope with the vagaries of a changing world, assists us in self-regulatory tasks, and helps us foster a positive sense of identity.

Most developmental forces appear likely to have a stabilizing influence on personality. For instance, to the extent that personality is established in part by genetic and biological influences, personality should be generally stable (see chapters by Buss and Brody, this volume). Adaptations and traits that have developed over the course of human evolution should be relatively ingrained and unchanging. Moreover, many of the developmental forces that shape our personality occur during early childhood, and much of our personal sense of self is developed before we reach adolescence. Thus, there are many reasons to assume that a certain degree of stability in personality is not only inevitable, but perhaps quite desirable.

On the other hand, there are reasons that we might want some malleability in personality. The spouse considering taking back an unfaithful spouse will want to believe that he or she has truly changed. Parole boards release prisoners back into society with the belief that they have changed their criminal ways. Individuals entering rehabilitation programs or begin-
ning psychotherapy hope that they will be able to make dramatic changes in important aspects of their lives. Hence, we want personality to change when it has an adverse effect on interpersonal relationships, mental or physical health, or on functioning in society.

Moreover, during our lives we encounter many different social contexts and developmental challenges that might affect our personalities (see chapters by Helson & Stewart and Franz, this volume). Thus, the inability to change and to adapt to situational and cultural demands may lead to poor psychological functioning.

It can be argued that simply being involved in a social world is likely to promote personality change. After all, significant others provide feedback and positive reinforcement for relationship-enhancing attitudes and behaviors, and they provide negative feedback regarding attitudes and behaviors that are relationship-damaging. Thus, interpersonal relationships might shape or modify our personalities. A variety of evidence indicates that social support is an important component of life change (Clifford, Tan, & Gorsuch, 1991). Family, friends, co-workers, and health care professionals can provide emotional and esteem support, feedback, information, reinforcement, and direct assistance that a person involved in trying to change frequently needs (Clifford et al., 1991; Marlatt, 1985).

However, some studies have shown that social support is not always predictive of motivation or behavioral change (Kelly, Zyzanski, & Alemagno, 1991). This may be because people tend to associate with others who have similar ideas, personalities, and backgrounds (Caspi & Herbener, 1990) and choose as their confidants people who will back their decisions and behaviors (Baumeister, 1991). It is possible that these others will hinder change, partially because they may feel threatened by the implications of potential changes. A spouse who likes you “just the way you are” is unlikely to encourage your attempts at personal growth or other personality changes. Indeed, such changes might be viewed as a threat to the social relationship. Thus, it appears that significant others often actively support or hinder change depending on their own vested interests in the outcome.

WHAT IS PERSONALITY?

Personality psychology is an incredibly diverse and diffuse field. As many authors in this volume point out, personality can be defined to encompass almost all aspects of human life and experience. How personality is defined obviously plays a large role in whether it is viewed as stable or malleable. For instance, if personality is defined as standing on basic traits, then perhaps we should not expect to see much change. After all, the measurement instruments commonly used to assess personality traits are
assumed to be reliable and stable over time. However, if the definition of personality is expanded to include motives, life goals, and overall psychological functioning, then there may be room for change. Costa and McCrae (this volume) argue that we need to differentiate basic tendencies from the characteristic adaptations that result from the interactions between basic tendencies and the social environment. In contrast, Helson and Stewart (this volume) suggest that key motives, attitudes, and adaptations are an important component of personality. It is not the attempt of this chapter to define the scope of personality, but readers should be aware that the answer to the question of whether personality can change is affected by the definition of personality (cf. Pervin, this volume).

The chapter by McAdams in this volume specifically addresses the critical issue of defining personality. McAdams sets out three levels of personality functioning: dispositional traits (e.g., the Big Five traits), personal concerns (e.g., goals and tasks), and the whole person (assessed through life narratives). As McAdams demonstrates, the issue of whether personality can change depends on which level researchers use to define personality.

HOW DO WE MEASURE PERSONALITY?

Some methods of measuring personality would seem to foster the finding that personality is very stable. For instance, self-reports on global traits, in which respondents are limited to choosing one response among five or seven possible responses, seem unlikely to reveal a great deal of personality change. Consider an item on a personality scale that has response options of 1 through 5. Individuals who score 4 or 5 are unlikely to later select responses 1 or 2, even if they believe that they have changed. Rather, individuals who originally scored 4 may believe they have changed, but select the response of 3 because they have not changed that much. Thus, the available response categories may be too gross for the amount of change that occurs. Alternatively, the meaning of selecting a 4 may itself change from Time 1 to Time 2, perhaps depending on the social and cultural context. How extraverted a person reports being may differ from the liberal 1960s to the conservative 1980s. Similarly, if all members of a cohort change in a systematic direction, the relative referent group changes and people might acknowledge that they have changed, but still select a 4 because compared with others they are still a 4. Of course, it is also possible that changes in scores will be due to error in measurement rather than to genuine changes in true scores (McCrae, in press). These issues are discussed at length in the ensuing chapters, especially the chapters by Costa and McCrae and by Helson and Stewart.
Another way to assess personality is through life narratives (McAdams, this volume) or personal interview (Miller & C'deBaca, this volume). With these methods, researchers examine change in a person's life from the person's own perspective. In these cases, personality is more broadly defined than by simple traits, and therefore change is often readily apparent. This method is not without its limitations, however. McFarland, Ross, and Gil-Trow (1992) showed that older adults tend to be biased in their recollections of past experiences, including their views of their personality in the past. They tended to bias their recollections in terms of implicit theories of aging. That is, they reported changing on dimensions on which they believed most older adults change (e.g., they believed older people show an increase in understanding and satisfaction with life and a decrease in activity and the ability to remember things). Similarly, a change in health status may be interpreted as a change in personality. At issue is the accuracy of recollections. As George Vaillant noted “It is all too common for caterpillars to become butterflies and then to maintain that in their youth they had been little butterflies. Maturity makes liars of us all” (1977, p. 197). Indeed, when Costa and McCrae (1989) separated one of their samples into groups based on whether subjects believed they had changed or not, the group who believed that they had “changed a good deal” did not differ from the group who “stayed pretty much the same” in terms of test–retest correlations on basic traits. This suggests that researchers should use caution when using retrospective accounts of change.

As most of the contributors to this volume argue, what is needed are more longitudinal studies that use multiple methods of assessing personality. Nesselroade and Boker (this volume) argue that data need to be collected at irregular intervals over long periods of time in order to control for systematic biases. We are now witnessing the culmination of many long-term studies of personality stability and change (see chapters by Helson & Stewart, Costa & McCrae, and Franz), and we can be optimistic that these various methodologies and techniques will continue to inform us about the aspects of personality that remain stable and those that appear to be more malleable. In addition, data archives (e.g., the Henry Murray Center of Radcliffe College) provide researchers with ready access to data from multiple longitudinal studies so that they can test their theories across different cohorts and contexts.

HOW DO WE ANALYZE CHANGE?

The statistical methods used to measure change have a profound influence on whether personality is seen as stable or malleable. For instance, some researchers have questioned whether difference scores or test–retest
correlations are able to capture the phenomenon of personality change (Alder & Scher, this volume). Chapters by Nesselroade and Boker, and by Alder and Scher, address some relatively new statistical techniques to measure change. For instance, one way to examine personality change is to use individual growth curves (Alder & Scher, this volume; Francis, Fletcher, Stuebing, Davidson, & Thompson, 1991), which may allow for a more precise estimate of individual change.

Other researchers contend that we need to look at individual lives to understand change (McAdams, 1993; Murray, 1938). Even if the norm is stability (and therefore group means show little change and test–retest correlations are very high), there might still be a substantial number of individuals who experience profound changes in personality. This suggests that we might wish to look at the outliers in longitudinal studies to see if there are systematic patterns among those who do show indications of personality change.

WHAT ARE THE TYPES OF CHANGES THAT PEOPLE MAKE?

Just as we need to be cognizant of the need to define personality, we also need to develop a better understanding of what exactly is meant by the term change. If people do change, do they change gradually over long periods of time, over brief periods of adjustment, or suddenly and dramatically, or do all three types of personality change occur? How much change does there need to be before we say that a person has changed? Are maturational developments that occur over decades evidence of genuine change or do maturational changes lead to a different state of the same construct? In therapy, people often try to make relatively sudden and dramatic changes in some aspect of their lives. Although the person who changes from shy to outgoing has changed, has the person who feels a little bit better about themselves changed? Is personality change better represented by the analogy of hot water becoming tepid, or by cold water turning into ice? The latter implies a very different state of being, whereas the former implies continuity and gradual settling (Miller & C’deBaca, this volume).

A variety of past research suggests that personality change is best described as gradual and subtle. For example, evidence of gradual change can be found in King’s (1973) *Five Lives at Harvard*, in which researchers examined the effect of the college experience on personality. King wrote, “The personality change in our five cases, with the possible exception of Hugh Post, was quiet, subtle, and not very exciting. It was evolutionary change, more difficult to describe than change that is dramatic, abrupt, and revolutionary” (p. 189). The changes “reflected an unfolding or gradual development rather than a sudden emergence of a new behavior or other striking change” (p. 218).
In contrast to these gradual changes, there are also what Miller and C'deBaca (this volume) refer to as quantum changes—sudden and dramatic changes that appear to alter individuals to the core. Individuals who go through religious or spiritual transformations, individuals who make abrupt changes in career aspirations or in occupation, and individuals recovering from traumatic events all seem to go through major and dramatic change. Vaillant’s (1977) 35-year follow-up of participants in the Grant Study led him to conclude that

if we follow adults for years, we can uncover startling changes and evolutions. We can discover developmental discontinuities in adults that are as great as the difference in personality between a nine-year-old and what he becomes at fifteen. (p. 372)

We are far from understanding the causes of such change, but part of the reason for our lack of understanding is that researchers have not been looking for such changes. As Davis and Millon (this volume) note, our conceptual models of change do not often include these radical shifts in personality (see also Block, 1971, and Helson & Stewart, this volume).

Perhaps, as noted by many of the contributors to this volume, we need to consider new and different models of personality change. Current psychological theories view change as linear, wherein change follows predictable progressions and maturations. One novel approach to understanding change might be to consider chaos theory, in which small initial perturbations produce enormous nonlinear change. The application of new and diverse perspectives on models of change may provide us with fresh insights into the issue of stability of personality (see chapters by Davis & Millon, Miller & C'deBaca, and Nesselroade & Boker).

A final issue that needs to be addressed is our bias to look for only positive instances of change. Do people experience both positive and negative changes in personality? Most researchers in this area have tended to concern themselves with positive change and personal growth. However, it also seems possible that people might experience personality change that interferes with successful adaptation. Models of change may be less powerful, and less accurate, when we consider only one end of the distribution of possible changes.

CAN PEOPLE CHOOSE TO CHANGE?

Even if we accept that some people seem to go through fundamental changes in personality, the question still remains whether people can choose to change, or whether change is always thrust on them. Many of the changes described in this volume represent maturational changes that are pretty much inevitable. Thus, change occurs due to increased age, change in
social or cultural context, or change in living circumstances. Yet, many people are interested in self-directed change. Many individuals devote considerable energies to trying to change; they attend self-help groups, read self-help books, enter therapy, and initiate efforts to change. The fundamental question is whether people can choose to change their personalities.

The large literature on self-motivated behavioral change may provide interesting insights for personality researchers trying to understand whether individuals can choose to change aspects of their personalities. Good analogies to volitional personality change are the changes that occur when individuals try to give up problematic substances or when they try to achieve and maintain a thinner body size. Research on this topic has benefited from excellent conceptual models, such as the one described by DiClemente in this volume. Personality researchers might find it very fruitful to consider whether these models of behavioral change can be applied to personality.

**HOW DO PEOPLE DESCRIBE ATTEMPTS AT CHANGE?**

One way to examine volitional attempts at personality change is to interview people who have tried to change and succeeded and compare their accounts with those of people who have tried to change and failed. We recently conducted a study that sought to address the attributions people make for successful and unsuccessful life change experiences (Heatherton & Nichols, 1993). A total of 119 students from the Harvard Extension School served as volunteers in our study. We asked them to describe instances in which they were either able or not able to make major life changes. The self-reported successful change stories differed in substantial and predictable ways from the stories of unsuccessful change. Although not all subjects in this study were trying to change their personalities, the attributions that individuals made for being able to change or not being able to change were quite similar across the domains in which the attempts were being made (e.g., some people tried to change their personalities, some tried to quit drug habits, others tried to change troubled relationships). Previous research has shown that the attributions people make about the change process are important for maintaining change (Sonne & Janoff, 1982; Weiner, 1985). For instance, attributing change to internal factors is associated with greater maintenance of change than is attributing change to external factors (Schoeneman & Curry, 1990; Sonne & Janoff, 1979).

Our study used the micronarrative technique (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Gergen & Gergen, 1988) to analyze how and why people changed or did not change. One group of subjects was asked to describe in detail a sudden and dramatic change that had occurred in any aspect of their lives. The other subjects were asked to describe an aspect of their lives they would like to suddenly and dramatically change and to tell why
they believed they had been unable to make the change. The stories were then coded and compared to determine which factors were most closely related to successful change and which factors were most likely to be mentioned as hindrances to change.

Micronarratives are autobiographical stories that focus on specific events. They represent the person's subjective evaluation of the event. These stories may not be totally accurate, in that people selectively construct, retrieve, and distort the narratives to fit their own self-concepts, but they do represent what the person believes is important (Baumeister et al., 1990). Micronarratives have become increasingly useful in studying motivation in topics that are difficult to test using conventional laboratory methods, for example, anger (Baumeister et al., 1990), guilt (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, in press), the termination of intimate relationships (Harvey, Flanary, & Morgan, 1988; Harvey, Weber, Galvin, Huszti, & Garnick, 1986; Vaughan, 1986), and criminal and antisocial activity (Katz, 1988).

The micronarrative technique is useful for studying personality change attempts, a difficult topic to examine for a variety of reasons. Change is a complex process involving many motivational, cognitive, and situational factors, all of which may be simultaneously important to effecting change. In many cases it will be impossible to establish which of these factors is most important. Similarly, it may be impossible for people to ever really know how they changed. It is likely that most individuals do not have access to the cognitive processes that create change (Freud, 1937/1964; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). That is, although individuals may be motivated to provide an explanation for change, it seems likely that their inferences about change processes will be based on their idiosyncratic beliefs about processes of change (McFarland et al., 1992).

Although individuals may be unable to specify the precise factors responsible for change, they are able to recount the events leading to change, the methods they used in an attempt to effect change, the difficulties they had with these attempts, and the strategies they used to maintain change (Prochaska, Velicer, Guadagnoli, Rossi, & DiClemente, 1991). By considering all the factors simultaneously, individuals may develop personal theories to account for the success or failure of their attempts at change. Such accounts may provide a wealth of information about personal beliefs and attributions regarding change, as well as indicate precipitating and ongoing events that may be related to successful change.

**Emotional Aspects of Change**

Both change and nonchange subjects in our study reported substantial amounts of negative affect, including hassles, frustrations, and emotional distress. People were motivated to leave unhappy relationships, to change...
unfulfilling careers, to change their attitudes toward themselves and their lives, to achieve more healthful life-styles, and to change undesirable personality traits. For example, one woman who had been unable to change an oppressive family relationship wrote,

I know that I'm scared of being too successful because I am afraid of having people depend on me and take more from me than I'm already giving them (which is already too much). I don't want to spend all my energy on other people. Maybe rather than have any success myself that I would have to share, I would like to have all my failure and disappointment to myself.

However, we found that individuals who reported making major changes described much stronger negative affect, including major suffering. For instance, a woman who was finally able to leave an abusive relationship wrote, “My whole life was one of helplessness. I was never believed. I became extremely upset and frightened.” After fleeing from the situation, her life changed from “a life of hell to one filled with happiness and many loving friends.” She now finds it “hard to believe that [her life] actually existed the way that [she] lived it.”

The Importance of Focal Events

A common theme in the successful change stories was the occurrence of some sort of focal incident that triggered the change attempt. Fifty-nine percent of the change stories compared with only nine percent of the nonchange stories contained descriptions of focal events. Miller and Rollnick (1991) noted that such focal events change the balance sheet of costs and benefits associated with the target behavior, such that they can represent the proverbial “straw that breaks the camel’s back.” These events lead people to reevaluate how their behavior fits in with their overall self-perception. One woman in our study who was living a type of hippie existence experienced such a focal event when she discovered that she was pregnant. She wrote, “I became disgusted with my life and decided I had had enough.” This pregnancy led her to move back to her hometown and assume a more traditional life-style. Her story indicates that many aspects of her personality changed during this transition. In contrast, the nonchangers were more likely to describe themselves as feeling confused and unfocused following focal events.

Often the behavior that individuals wish to change is dissonant with how they would like to view themselves. Baumeister (this volume) notes that people, motivated to see themselves and their behaviors in the best possible light, frequently hold positive illusions. When focal events lead to a reevaluation, behaviors that are not consistent with one’s identity create
unpleasant dissonance and motivate the person to try to alter the behavior. Thus, the focal event creates a crystallization of discontent that people cannot ignore. One woman described how taking a course on the psychology of women led to such a crystallization of discontent and subsequent life change:

It opened up a Pandora’s box. . . . I realized my relationship with my husband was not satisfying to me. . . . I could not tolerate the status quo any longer. . . . I had changed in my core. I was ready to go it alone—whatever it meant, in search of my own true independence and inner validity.

**Change in Identity**

Our findings indicated that people who reported successfully changing believed that the establishment of a new identity was critical for long-term change. This new identity formed after the reevaluation of life goals and meanings (Baumeister, this volume). Successful changers frequently reported a flash of insight into their problematic attitudes and behaviors, and their stories indicated that they had developed a sense of wisdom about the factors that had previously prevented them from changing. Those who had not successfully changed were less committed to the change process, were more ambivalent about the desirability of change, and were more likely to be clinging to their current role and identity. Stall and Biernacki (1986) proposed that the development of a new identity was one of the most important steps for maintaining change. The change in identity incorporates the changed behavior so that the previous behavior is no longer part of the self. One man in our study who had not been able to change said, “When I do make the effort to overcome my shyness, I feel that it is not really me acting, that it is someone else.” In contrast, successful changers made comments like “I have changed in my core” and “I could see a total change in my personality.”

**Attributions for Change**

Individuals who reported successful change were more likely to claim that they had control in general, and they were less likely to refer to external obstacles to change. This supports the hypothesis that attributions of personal agency and internal control are important for maintaining behavioral change (Schoeneman & Curry, 1990; Sonne & Janoff, 1979; Weiner, 1985). However, it is quite possible that such attributions resulted from, rather than caused, attitudinal and behavioral change. Micronarrative accounts are by nature correlational and no cause-effect determinations can
be made. Nonetheless, the factors that individuals currently regard as important for maintaining change may be genuinely important in doing so. People who believe that they have conquered their cigarette addiction through willpower or who have forced themselves to be more outgoing may have created a self-fulfilling prophecy that helps maintain their behavioral change. Independent of the factors truly responsible for change, people's beliefs about which factors are important may be the critical foundations underlying their ability to remain changed.

These narratives not only provided considerable support for various theories of change, but, even more important, they also provided a glimpse at the phenomenology of the change experience. Our analysis indicated that there were important emotional, motivational, cognitive, and interpersonal processes that facilitated or inhibited change. Moreover, we found that these processes acted in confluence, so that individuals reported all of them as being important for effecting change.

Of course, we have no direct evidence that people actually managed to make fundamental changes in their attitudes or behavior. In fact, in terms of the goals of the current volume, many of the changes represented behaviors rather than aspects of personality. Nonetheless, many of the stories described explicit attempts to change identity and personality traits. Individuals who reported making such personality changes expressed feelings that they had changed to the core, that they had become different people. Thus, many people believe that they are able to effect major changes in personality. Obviously future research, such as natural history studies, is necessary to examine whether individuals are able to make such profound changes in personality.

NEED FOR THIS VOLUME

Personality change has been an important topic in psychology for many years. It is an issue that cuts across subdisciplines and is of special interest to developmental, social, personality, and clinical researchers. Recent theoretical and empirical advances indicate that now is the perfect time to gather multiple perspectives on personality change into one comprehensive volume. For instance, the perspectives of behavioral genetics and sociobiology have provided details about which aspects of personality appear to be most stable. Similarly, many fine longitudinal studies of personality development have provided important data for the examination of basic issues of stability and change, and an understanding of normal life course transitions. Moreover, we now have sophisticated statistical techniques and powerful computer resources to analyze large longitudinal data sets. As a result, this seemed to us to be the ideal time to publish a comprehensive volume on aspects of personality change.
OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

This volume is divided into four sections. In the first section various agents of stability are considered. Costa and McCrae present evidence indicating that basic traits (i.e., the Big Five) do not change significantly and tend to have strong test–retest correlations, even after many decades. Brody, using the analogy of intelligence, argues that genetic endowment produces relative stability of personality. Buss argues that evolutionary forces lead individuals to seek out contexts and situations that reinforce dispositional traits.

In the next section, various perspectives on theory and methodology are presented. Davis and Millon argue that many of our current paradigmatic conceptions of personality appear to preclude change. They argue that we need to consider new theoretical approaches, possibly those used by related physical sciences. The chapters by Nesselroade and Boker and by Alder and Scher examine measurement issues and models of personality change. Both chapters offer a number of instructive examples of sophisticated mathematical models of change. The chapter by DiClemente focuses on applications of the transtheoretical change model to personality change. This model is an especially influential model in the study of addictive behaviors, and DiClemente raises the intriguing question of whether insights gained from studying behavioral change can be applied to understanding personality change.

In the third section, personality transitions across the life span are considered. Franz examines changes in implicit motives and preoccupations, especially those related to generativity during midlife. Helson and Stewart present a variety of important studies demonstrating that personality does appear to change as a consequence of changing social roles and societal contexts.

In the final section, there are four chapters dealing with various conceptions of change. Miller and C'deBaca present their theory of quantum change, that is, sudden transformations of the entire person. Baumeister describes how the crystallization of discontent motivates attempts at major life change. Such crystallization occurs when individuals gain insight into the pattern of negative factors associated with their current situations. McAdams's chapter helps clarify differences between various definitions of personality by pointing out that there are different levels of analysis or different ways of considering the person. McAdams cogently argues that the issue of stability of personality depends on which level of the person we are examining. Pervin's chapter considers various ways of looking at personality change and discusses the implications of the various models. In the conclusion, Weinberger discusses the common themes and important issues that emerged in this volume. Weinberger also addresses clinical issues in personality change, with a specific emphasis on what is changed by psychotherapy.
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