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A look behind the curtain at social work supervision in interprofessional practice settings: critical themes and pressing practical challenges

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ABSTRACT

Supervision has been an integral aspect of social work practice since the early days of the profession. The literature suggests that 'supervision is an essential and integral part of the training and continuing education required for the skillful development of professional social workers' (p. 5). The literature does appear to support that all social workers ought to have some level of supervision; however, within interprofessional settings, where social work is one of many professions, that goal may not be easily attained. Although some interprofessional settings, like hospitals, have social work departments, other settings, like schools, may only have one social worker, resulting in a workplace environment devoid of social work supervision. This article presents findings from a national study of social workers employed in interprofessional organizations. It was hypothesized that this cohort could provide important insights about the nature of social work supervision in agencies characterized by an interdisciplinary workforce. Using both open-ended and specific categorical questions, respondents were asked to describe and convey information about the supervision process and experience in their agency. An Internet-based survey was used to reach a broad spectrum of social work practitioners and educators (975 deliverable and 426 completed) across the United States.

Introduction

Supervision has been an integral aspect of social work practice since the early days of the profession (Beddoe & Howard, 2012; Brashears, 1995; Kadushin, 1976; Munson, 1983). The National Association of Social Worker and Association of Social Work Boards (NASW & ASWB, 2013) Task Force on Supervision suggests that 'supervision is an essential and integral part of the training and continuing education required for the skillful development of professional social workers' (p.5). At first glance, it does seem logical to suggest, and the literature does appear to support, that all social workers ought to have some level of supervision; however, within interprofessional settings, where social work is one of many professions, that goal may not be easily attained. Although some interprofessional settings, like hospitals, have social work departments, other settings, like schools, may only have one social worker, resulting in a workplace environment devoid of social work supervision.

This article presents findings from a national study of social workers employed in interprofessional organizations. It was hypothesized that this cohort could provide important insights about the nature of social work supervision in agencies characterized by an interdisciplinary workforce. Using both open-ended and specific categorical questions, respondents were asked to describe and convey

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information about the supervision process and experience in their agency. An Internet-based survey was used to reach a broad spectrum of social work practitioners and educators (975 deliverable and 426 completed) across the United States.

Clarification of terms

According to the literature, a host setting is defined as a workplace in which social work is practiced, but non-social workers dominate the labour force; the setting is 'host' to the social worker. In a 'non-host' setting, the agency is dominated by social workers and has a distinct social work mission (Dane & Simon, 1991; DiFranks, 2008). Interprofessional practice (IPP) is a communication and decision-making process performed by a diverse group of professionals, producing a synergy of grouped knowledge and skill (Bridges, Davidson, Odegard, Maki, & Tomkowiak, 2011).

The definition of social worker has been the subject of considerable debate. For this study, the term social worker will be defined as a graduate of a social work education programme at the bachelor's or master's degree level who uses his/her knowledge and skill to provide services to clients (Gibelman & Sweifach, 2008).

Brief history

Social work has a long tradition of prioritizing supervision as an inherent aspect of practice, dating back to the Charity Organization Movement. The literature is mixed about the early function of social work supervision with some attributing that function to administrative accountability and others attributing it to an educational function. Still others believed that the function was for emotional support (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014; Kutzik, 1977; Tsui, 2005; Waldfogel, 1983).

During the Charity Organization Movement days, when social work functions were performed by volunteer 'friendly visitors,' supervision was provided by paid consultants who met with the volunteer. These consultants were early predecessors of today's modern supervisor (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014). Over time, as the helping field evolved and professionalized, the training function performed by agencies became burdensome (Munson, 2002), leading to an eventual shift in the supervision function from agency to university (Munson, 2002; Tsui, 2005); and supervision became an integral aspect of social work education.

Commentators suggest that the form and structure of supervision as it exists today, is roughly the same as it was during the mid-1800s (Munson, 2002; Tsui, 2005). According to the literature, supervision is 'a lifelong process of professional critique and learning' (Davys & Beddoe, 2010), and a necessary aspect of the social work agency's administrative structure (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014). Over time, supervision became a more formalized and identifiable process (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014) built into an organization's day-to-day professional function.

As the profession of social work has developed, changed over time, so too has social work supervision (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014). The main elements however, still characterized as 'traditional supervision,' centred around areas of administration, education, and support, have been a consistent feature from its beginnings to the present (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014). Each of these areas tend to be emphasized differently, affected at times by differences in supervisor style, agency culture, and even by country-specific trends. For example, supervision is conceived and practiced differently around the world. The United Kingdom, South Africa, former Soviet Block Countries (Romania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Croatia, and Russia) (Davis, 2010), and the United States are similar in that supervision is primarily focused on administration, whereas in Sweden, the emphasis is more on support (Bradley, Engelbrecht, & Höjer, 2010). Social work supervision in Germany and other German-speaking countries seems to be far more advanced than in other countries around the world; it has distinguished itself as a profession in itself, offering services even beyond social work to other professions (Belardi, 2002). In German-speaking countries, supervision emphasizes all three elements.

Frameworks and configurations for supervision

The various configurations of supervision used today include (but are not limited to): (a) dyadic, a one-on-one model consisting of a supervisor and supervisee; (b) triadic and group model, consisting of three or more supervisees who are supervised by one supervisor; (c) 'peer supervision,' a non-hierarchical structure in which professionals with a similar level of qualification and experience supervise each other; and (d) an autonomous model, usually reserved for the more experienced practitioner, in which the professional is self-governing and 'released from the constraints of traditional supervision' (Munson, 1979, p. 159).

There are many variables that together determine the supervisory framework chosen by a particular agency. In some cases supervision is uni-professional or discipline-specific only involving personnel of the same professional discipline. The uni-professional method has been an established supervision tradition for many years, originating back to the beginnings of the social work profession. In other cases, supervision is cross-disciplinary or interdisciplinary, and involves personnel from different professional disciplines. The literature highlights that over the past 25 years, cross-disciplinary supervision has been influenced by a number of factors, including the development of collaborative approaches to social work practice, budgetary constraints, agency restructuring, and a lack of available professional staff (Berger & Mizrahi, 2001; Bogo, Paterson, Tufford, & King, 2011; Hutchings, 2012).

Over time, social work practice, and thus supervision, has become more and more interprofessional. The literature attributes this to two main factors: (1) many uni-disciplinary departments have turned into multi-disciplinary teams (Beddoe & Howard, 2012; Berger & Mizrahi, 2001) and (2) social workers have enjoyed consistent growth over time within interprofessional settings, beginning with schools and hospitals during the early 1900s, and most recently in relatively new areas such as political practice domains, and forensics (Mizrahi & Davis, 2008).

Several commentators have expressed concern about a progressive diminution of social work supervision in both social work and interprofessional settings (Beddoe & Howard, 2012; Berger & Mizrahi, 2001; Hair, 2013; Lawler, 2015; Noble & Irwin, 2009; White, 2015); suggesting that professional supervision has steadily moved away from those elements of supervisory practices and processes identified in the social work literature as 'best practice.' Other commentators explain that as long as supervision is in the form of 'best practice,' it need not be dispensed by a social work supervisor (Bogo et al., 2011). This is especially relevant given the percentage of social workers employed within interprofessional settings. Commentators do appear to agree that as social work has diversified into new workplace environments, supervision has taken on new forms (Harlow & Izod, 2015; Lawler, 2015).

Today, it is generally accepted that the majority of social workers practice in agencies that are interdisciplinary in nature (Abramson & Bronstein, 2008; Social Work Policy Institute, 2011; Wambach, Haynes, & White, 1999). This has resulted in inevitable changes in the scope, nature, and practice of supervision. In many ways, supervision in interprofessional settings today is quite diverse, across a variety of practice settings and populations, moulded uniquely to agency and workforce factors.

This paper offers a snapshot of the ways in which supervision is conceptualized, understood, and conducted for social workers employed by interprofessional agencies. Focus is placed on better understanding the perceptions of social workers about their supervisory experience.

Methodology

Study questions of this descriptive, exploratory study, sought to solicit the views and suggestions of respondents about the supervisory experience in their agency. The main research questions asked respondents to provide information about their supervisor's professional discipline, to offer perceptions about how they view supervision/their supervisor, and how they perceive their supervisor

views/values their work/opinions/suggestions. Also asked were questions regarding the frequency of social work supervision, and if infrequent, to describe what the experience of being without social work supervision is like. Findings were expected to offer a deeper understanding about the supervisory experience for social workers employed within interprofessional settings.

The main element of the study involved the use of a quantitative online survey instrument. Key topic areas of the survey were derived from a review of the findings and conclusions of previous scholarship on supervision, and social work practice within interprofessional settings (e.g. Breiman, 2001; Dane & Simon, 1991; Grissett, 2008). The survey was developed using Survey Monkey, a web-based platform for conducting surveys. All responses were anonymous, and no method of tracking individual identity was utilized.

A database of social workers was created using staff directories from agency websites (identified as interprofessional settings), like government agencies, corrections, hospices, hospitals, nursing homes, employee assistance, community organizations, religious/sectarian agencies, and schools. The cover letter invited respondents to forward the survey link to social work colleagues. This is a mechanism similar to convenience and snowball sampling (Babbie, 2010) or word-of-mouth communication, termed in the literature as the 'pass-along' approach (Norman & Russell, 2006). Some agencies list email addresses of staff, and others do not. An effort was made to include at least five agencies in each state. Agencies in all 50 states were included in the database.

Instrument

The first section of the survey instrument asked respondents to provide workplace demographics. The second section of the survey focused on respondent perceptions about their supervisory experience. The final section focused on socio-demographic areas.

Data analysis and measures

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 20.0. Means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages were used to generate descriptive results. A significance level of 0.05 was used for all inferential statistics. To establish the significance between variables, both nonparametric (chi squares) and parametric (t-tests, ANOVAs, and Pearson product moment correlation coefficients) tests were conducted.

The sample

Of the 1100 surveys sent, 975 surveys were successfully delivered electronically; 225 bounced back as undeliverable, most of which were due to lapsed email addresses, although some could have been attributed to email being treated as spam by institutional mail servers. Of the successful transmissions, 426 of those surveyed returned completed useable questionnaires for an overall 44% response rate. Of the 354 respondents who indicated their gender, 87.0% ($n = 308$) were female, and 13.0% ($n = 46$) male. This ratio is consistent with other data on the human services labour force, which reflects a consistent trend of feminization (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). The sample was primarily from two age groups: 30–39 (30.9%; $n = 108$) and 50–59 (29.1%; $n = 102$). In addition, the sample was primarily Caucasian (91.4%, $n = 318$), married (76.1%, $n = 268$), and Christian (65.3%, $n = 222$).

Respondents were fairly evenly distributed across large cities, small cities, suburbs, and rural areas. Respondents also provided their state of residence, which was then coded into the 10 federal regions used for census enumeration. For purposes of analysis, the 10 regions were then re-coded into 4 regions: Northeast, South, Midwest, and West. The geographic distribution of the 338 respondents who answered the question is as follows: Northeast ($n = 86$), Midwest ($n = 132$), South ($n = 88$), and West ($n = 32$).

Respondents are an experienced group of human service professionals. The vast majority (94.9%, $n = 332$) reported having 10 or more years of work experience in social work. Only 2.9% ($n = 10$) reported having less than 3 years of experience. A large number of respondents indicated being a member of an interdisciplinary team (78.9%, $n = 336$). About one-third of respondents indicated union membership (32.2%, $n = 134$).

Setting characteristics

Respondents were asked a series of questions about their practice setting. These questions were included to gain a picture of the mission and workforce of agencies represented in the sample. The vast majority of respondents (88.9%, $n = 315$) indicated that the primary mission of their practice setting was not related to social work. Most respondents of this study work in schools (39.3%, $n = 139$), followed by hospitals (14.9%, $n = 53$), government (6.5%, $n = 26$), and special education schools (6.0%, $n = 21$). Other practice settings, all fewer than 6% included adoption, geriatrics, hospice, employee assistance program, criminal justice, addictions, and community centres.

Respondents were asked to estimate the percentage of employees in their practice setting who are social workers. For 22% ($n = 78$) the respondent was the only social worker in their agency. Just under 2/3 (65.3%, $n = 238$) indicated that 'only a few' social workers are on staff at their agency.

Supervisory experiences

Just over half (58.3%, $n = 181$) of the 310 respondents who answered questions about their supervisory experiences indicated receiving regular (weekly) supervision; 42.9% ($n = 78$) of those receiving regular supervision, receive that supervision from a social worker. Respondents who indicated receiving supervision from a social worker posted several anecdotal comments which somewhat represents the range of supervisory experiences contextualized as social work supervision: 'several social workers eat lunch regularly together and talk;' 'I speak with social work colleagues in other settings when needed;' 'we have quarterly meetings with other social workers in the system;' 'I meet with social workers in the setting a few times a month, but just to review cases;' 'I have traditional weekly supervision with my boss.'

About 1/3 (32.7%, $n = 101$) of respondents indicated not receiving supervision. Nine per cent identified supervision as 'sporadic' ($n = 28$). Comments were received from 132 respondents with considerable overlap; representative comments include the following: 'I rely on peers – colleagues, co-workers or other mental health staff for supervision' ($n = 35$); 'I have a boss for administrative direction, but do not receive supervision' ($n = 21$); 'I am the only social worker in my agency' ($n = 20$); 'supervisors know little about what I do' ($n = 18$); 'we only have administrative supervision' ($n = 16$); 'I do receive supervision, but I pay for outside supervision from a social worker as needed' ($n = 12$); 'there is no structure in my agency for regular supervision' ($n = 10$).

When asked about their relationship with their direct supervisor, the great majority of the 152 respondents who answered the question strongly agreed/agreed that they are on good terms (91.4%, $n = 139$). Respondents also felt as if their opinions and suggestions were highly valued by their supervisor (96.8%, $n = 147$). Comments were received from 11 respondents reflecting three main themes related to their relationship with a supervisor: (1) 'Although highly valued, I only have limited influence;' (2) 'I feel supported but not understood;' and (3) 'It is difficult to find a common meeting time.'

Respondents indicating being without social work supervision were asked to reflect on that experience. Responses were received from 120 respondents. The statements below reflect the 10 most frequently cited responses (see Table 1).

Respondents were asked to explain why regular or semi-regular supervision from a social worker is not available. Responses from 90 respondents fell into 4 categories. (1) Practice setting structure is

Table 1. Ten most frequently cited responses.

(1) I feel isolated and alone; it is difficult.
(2) It would be nice to have someone with social work skills.
(3) I am in the later stages of professional practice so it is OK, if I didn't have social work supervision during the early part of my career, I would have felt alone and lost.
(4) It's very different from being in an agency dominated by social workers – here I am seen as an expert in behavioural and emotional areas.
(5) I am lucky – my supervisor and I share many of the same professional values.
(6) It can be difficult at times since social workers have a way of thinking and problem solving that is uniquely different from other mental health professionals.
(7) Although a lone social worker in my setting, I have access to other social workers in settings within our system (school).
(8) I am fortunate to be very experienced – and mostly depend on myself.
(9) My supervisor is open to learning about social work concerns.
(10) It's like being lost at sea without a paddle.
(11) Limits my practice and growth.

not set up that way (39.3%, $n = 36$); (2) there are no other social workers in a position to supervise (37.9%, $n = 34$); (3) administrators do not feel it is necessary (15.8%, $n = 14$); and (4) cost (7%, $n = 6$).

Discussion

Findings indicate a mixed picture of supervisory experiences and outcomes for social workers in IPP settings. Only 1/4 of respondents indicate being engaged in some form of social work supervision, although from comments, it appears that only a small proportion receive 'traditional' social work supervision. According to the literature, these findings are consistent with the results of other studies within both interprofessional settings and intraprofessional contexts (Beddoe & Howard, 2012; Berger & Mizrahi, 2001; Hair, 2013; Noble & Irwin, 2009; White, 2015). In general, formal or traditional supervision, as outlined by NASW and ASWB as 'Best Practices,' (NASW & ASWB, 2013) appears to be on the decline. In this study, a small minority of interprofessionally employed social workers receive supervision from other social workers. Respondents expressed that when they do receive 'supervision' (from both social workers and non-social work supervisors) from the individual characterized as their 'boss' or 'supervisor,' much of it is administrative or task-based. A number of respondents stated that non-social work supervisors 'don't understand what we do.' One respondent stated: 'It can be difficult at times since social workers have a way of thinking and problem solving that is uniquely different from other mental health professionals.' Some respondents indicate feeling 'lost without a paddle,' 'lonely, and isolated at times,' 'with no one that can speak our language.' Others were more positive, stating 'I am lucky, my supervisor, although not a social worker, and I share many of the same values;' and 'my supervisor is open to learning about what I do and how I do it.' A number of respondents indicated that they depend on their supervisor 'for direction, but not for support or traditional supervision.' Respondents who were in the middle or later stages of their career, stated that at this point in their career, 'it is OK, if I don't have social work supervision now, but during the early part of my career, I would have felt alone and lost.'

Hair (2013) states that social workers and social work supervisors throughout the world 'have been expressing growing concerns about the diminishing availability and decreased quality of supervision' (p. 2). Respondents of this study indicated that with persistence, ingenuity, and drive, strategies can be developed to compensate for the lack of formal or traditional supervision. For example, some respondents call on social work peers and colleagues for informal supervision; others pay privately and go to social workers outside their agency. Some respondents indicate receiving formal supervision from non-social work mental health professionals. Others explain that they interact with interdisciplinary colleagues as part of a team to discuss cases and issues.

For many social workers, the importance of supervision is 'drilled in' during fieldwork internships. Supervision is formal and structured, emphasizing support, education, skill building, reflection, etc.

This paradigm serves as an entrée into the profession, and begins a process in which students are socialized into a supervisory world characterized by these key elements. When transitioning into the professional world however, it appears that supervision takes a left turn. While 'best practices' would suggest that many of the elements contained in the supervisory experience of students ought to continue for the professional, the respondents of this study as well as the literature in general explain that supervision today is largely focused on task and administrative responsibilities alone; professionals, unless external options are sought and found, are left to figure out the 'traditional' aspects of supervision by seeking out other alternatives, which many do, or go without.

Although much of the recent literature acknowledges this concern (Beddoe & Howard, 2012; Hair, 2013; Lawler, 2015; White, 2015), and despite recent initiatives specifically in North America (NASW & ASWB, 2013) and the United Kingdom (Godden, 2012) suggesting 'best practices' and policies, the profession appears to have taken a passive–aggressive approach towards implementation. Supervisory guidelines for students are strict, and mostly adhered to; best practices and policies have been detailed by major social work organizations (NASW, ASWB, and British Association of Social Workers); in order to be licensed in most US states at the clinical level, practitioners must document clinical hours with a certified clinical supervisor; the literature continues to reiterate the importance of supervision; and, individual social workers indicate that supervision is beneficial and needed. With regard to the actual practice of supervision, however, we have been passive, allowing for an alarming erosion in supervisory practices and supervision quality.

Limitations

There are a few limitations in this study that must be discussed. A modified convenience sampling method was used to collect the data rather than a random sample from a list of social work professionals in order to reduce costs. As such, the results may not be generalizable to the entire population of social workers. As well, it is possible that this method led to a self-selection bias, that is, the study may have attracted only those social workers who have an interest in workplace issues. Furthermore, the use of a web-based online survey might result in obtaining a biased sample, as it unintentionally excludes potential participants who lack access to or comfort with the Internet. A possible additional limitation is that the study population included a small percentage of respondents who work in non-host settings, this could raise questions about generalizability.

Implications and recommendations

The implications for a social work workforce that in general, is going largely unsupervised, are clear. One way to possibly change course is to attach a supervision requirement to licensure, in the same way that continuing education credits are mandated to maintain one's license. In order to be licensed in all US states, social workers are required to complete continuing education requirements. Many employers 'provide their social work staff with time off to attend continuing education (CE) programs, pay for trainings, and/or provide incentives for social workers" participation in such activities' (NASW, 2008, p. 8). Another pre-existing example of requirements linked to the maintenance or pursuit of credentials, relates to the mandated number of supervisory hours required for a social worker to transition from the licensed Master of Social Work (MSW) level to the licensed Clinical level. Supervision hours with an approved credentialed supervisor are strictly specified. The applicant is required to maintain weekly supervision in order to sit for the clinical licensing exam. Perhaps a 'supervision requirement' could be developed, in which social workers would need to log supervisory hours in the same way continuing education units or clinical hours are maintained? This type of oversight does appear to work within the contexts described.

These examples specify requirements that one needs in order to maintain or achieve specific credentials. It would seem reasonable and justifiable to develop a mandate, similar to the models

described above, in which a supervision requirement for professionals would be linked to license renewal.

Conclusion

Over the past two years, Community Care, a social service information provider based in the United Kingdom, has conducted research regarding the state of supervision in the United Kingdom (Community Care, 2014). The latest results mirror a trend noted in the general literature identifying the state of social work supervision as abysmal (Community Care, 2014). A consistent body of empirical research over the past three decades substantiates the benefits of supervision (Beddoe, 2010; Cohen and Laufer, 1999; Harkness, 1995; Harkness & Hensley, 1991; Hensley, 2003; Lloyd, King, & Chenoweth, 2002; Mor Barak, Travis, Pyun, & Xie, 2009; Southworth, 2010), and the negative impact that the lack of supervision has on workers, such as harm to patients (Kilminster & Jolly, 2000), increase in stress (Fineman, 1985), negative effects on worker health (Kim & Lee, 2009; Storey & Billingham, 2001), high turnover (Kim & Lee, 2009; Mena & Bailey, 2007; Zhang, Tsingan, & Zhang, 2013), and impeding worker effectiveness and quality (Kim & Lee, 2009; Mena & Bailey, 2007; Yagil, 2006; Zhang et al., 2013).

The United Kingdom has been at the forefront of developing supervision policy and standards for its social work workforce. A comprehensive toolkit developed by Skills for Care and the Children's Workforce Development Council (2007) provides guidance to organizations seeking to develop a high-quality supervision approach for its workforce. The Uinted Kingdom's Social Work Taskforce (2009) developed clear universal standards for employers on best practices in supervising employees. In Northern Ireland, the Department of Health Services and Public Safety clearly articulates supervision policy, standards, and criteria, delineating minimum standards for the implementation of an effective and consistent approach to supervision within childcare settings (Green & Myers, 2008). In Canada, the Newfoundland & Labrador Association of Social Workers has developed 'Standards for Supervision of Social Work Practice' a document highlighting that the principle objective of having standards for supervision is to provide clients with the best possible services. Underlying this objective is the assumption that without supervision, services to clients are compromised. In the United States, the ASWB and NASW collaborated to produce 'Best Practice Standards in Social Work Supervision.' This is a comprehensive framework specifying 'best practices' for social work practitioners and agencies; it provides a 'general framework that promotes uniformity and serves as a resource for issues related to supervision in the social work supervisory community' (NASW & ASWB, 2013, p. 5).

Despite the aforementioned initiatives, and others, developed to improve the level and quality of supervision over the past 10 years, studies (Beddoe & Howard, 2012; Berger & Mizrahi, 2001; Hair, 2013; Noble & Irwin, 2009; White, 2015) have not uncovered any evidence of change. Perhaps it is time to regulate supervision practices in the same way that supervision is currently regulated for MSW and Bachelor of Social Work fieldwork students, or for those completing hours towards their clinical license? Supervision as described in textbooks does not exist (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014) and unfortunately, little has been done to rectify its diminution. Prior research has outlined an array of recommendations to mitigate the downward spiral, however, the trend has continued. High standards are part of the long established tradition of social work, and supervision, as part of this tradition, has served as the fabric that helps to support these standards. It appears that supervisory practices have suffered an incremental decline, and it is plausible that many social work professionals have become acclimated to the practice of not receiving supervision; a 'new normal.' It is conceivable that if not remediated, the state of social work supervision will continue to worsen, eventually impairing the ability to maintain the professional standards that have long characterized the profession.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Jay Sweifach, DSW, LCSW is a Professor at the Wurzweiler School of Social Work, Yeshiva University, NY. Dr. Sweifach has authored over 30 journal articles, and presents nationally and internationally on an array of topics.

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