

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS IN SOCIAL WORK 45

Social Work and Evidence-Based Practice

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What Professionals Need from Research

Beyond Evidence-Based Practice Jan Fook

What do professionals need from research? A few decades ago this might have been a relatively simple question to answer, but in more recent times the idea of professionalism is undergoing renewed debate in response to social and economic changes (Rossiter 1996; Shapiro 2000). In addition, the idea of research is expanding and becoming more complex as ideas about the nature of knowledge and knowledge-generation develop. To examine in detail what professionals need from research, we need to some extent to review the meaning of professionalism, and the sorts of contributions research can make in developing notions of effective professionalism and professional practice in relation to the current climate.

In this chapter my main aim is to draw up a research agenda for professionals in the light of changes in the current context. I start from the premise that the evidence-based practice movement, although representing a major recent change, is nevertheless only one particular manifestation of changes which affect current professional practice. To gain a comprehensive picture of research directions which are needed we need to understand this movement in the context of other and broader changes. In this chapter I try to link some directions for professional research with this broad context of changes, which will help us map future pathways for professionalism.

I begin by outlining how current economic, workplace and social changes influence expectations of professional practice, and how expectations of professional knowledge and accountability must change accordingly. I then use this discussion to draw up a framework for guiding the contribution of research for professionals. Where appropriate I include examples of types of research approaches, studies, designs, and methods which might meet these needs.

What does it mean to be a professional? *The idea of* professions

Traditional 'trait' approaches to defining the professions characterise them as including a series of indispensable features: being founded on a mission of service; the use of a specialist and definable body of knowledge and set of skills; and the regulation of entry to the professional group by a professional body (Greenwood 1957). Using this functionalist set of criteria (Shapiro 2000), it seems a relatively simple task to distinguish between, and accord differing status to, different occupational groupings depending on the number of such features they exhibit.

However, this highlights the idea of another perspective on the professions, which recognises that professions are also defined in status terms (Johnson 1970; Parry and Parry 1976; Hugman 1991): an important part of their definition lies in their ability to lay claim to and control a body of specialist knowledge, which in turn legitimates their social position. How professions produce and use this knowledge to maintain their status within changing social and economic contexts becomes a major issue. The process of professionalisation can therefore be seen as a process of defining, laying claim to, and controlling a distinct body of knowledge and skills, or expertise.

What is common to both these perspectives is that professionalism does involve a number of key elements - a knowledge dimension, a value dimension, and a control dimension - although the discourse about them may vary. Because of the service dimension, professions embody an imperative to apply or practise their knowledge in a way which benefits the societies or communities which

provide their mandate. Neither of these perspectives in fact excludes the other: the particular features of professions might perform many different functions, legitimating the status of the professional at the same time as serving a community group. In some cases one might depend upon the other.

In this chapter I take what might be termed a type of postmodern view of professions - that professionalism *per se* is not necessarily about either the pursuit of status or the 'innocent' provision of service. There might in fact be many instances in which the same activity can function in contradictory ways, or in complementary ways for different groups: it is difficult to control or even predict the many differing effects of one piece of action. In this context, then, what is important is that processes of professionalisation, and professional activities generally, attempt to contribute to building up relevant knowledge, and bettering both professional and service user positions in collaborative rather than competitive ways. In my view professional legitimation and the provision of better services are not necessarily mutually exclusive endeavours.

In this type of view, what become the more important questions for professionals are not whether they are in general terms preserving their own status or serving the interests of service users, but how and whether specific knowledges and practices can function to serve the interests of specific service users at any one time. These types of questions are becoming much more difficult to answer in the current context of changes.

Current challenges

What characterises the current contexts in which professionals work? It is commonly recognised that, with processes of globalisation, practice takes place in more complex, uncertain and changing environments. Ironically, with the increased economic and technological 'compressing' (Robertson 1992) of the world through globalisation, there is a related 'fragmentation' of old cultural, political and geographic structures, and in this climate of change the uncertainty of our social world and its interactions is increasingly acknowledged. This uncertainty means that the ability of professionals to practise effectively on the basis of tried and tested knowledge is undermined considerably.

Some of the economic changes associated with globalisation produce increased competition (Dominelli 1996). This increased competition leads to a more managerialised and technocratised workplace, both adding up to an increasing deprofessionalisation. In order for services to remain competitive they must be measurable and marketable. This means that professional specialist ownership of bodies of knowledge and skills which are value-based are seen as non-competitive in a global market. In order to develop competitive services, managers seek to break down and challenge professional ownership of knowledge and skill domains. If such expertise can be delivered in smaller discrete packages by less qualified people, or by machines, it can be marketed more cheaply and in greater economies of scale.

By the same token, jobs are framed in more fragmented and programme-defined ways. For example, Parton (1998) talks about how social *workers* are now seen as case *managers*, involved in tasks such as assessing need and risk and delivering packages of care, rather than as case *workers* using therapeutic skills in human relationships. In Australia, deprofessionalisation is manifesting itself in more short-term, contract and low-wage employment (MacDonald 2000), and in the employment of professionals such as social workers in jobs which are either not defined as social work positions, or which only require a lower level of qualification (Hawkins *et al.* 2000).

This increasing deprofessionalisation and technocratisation of skills has led to 'border skirmishes' and competition between professions and disciplines, many wanting to claim exclusive or dominant expertise in newly defined skill areas such as case management (Fook 2002, pp.149-150). The ability to practise in interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary ways has therefore become important in capturing new skill areas.

There are related social and cultural changes as well. It is widely acknowledged that the changes of globalisation are associated with postmodern thinking (Parton 1994). These changes have called into question the nature of knowledge and the legitimate forms of its generation, up-ending the traditional hierarchical divisions between, on the one hand, generalisable and tested theory developed through 'scientific research' produced by elite researchers and, on the other, everyday practice knowledge generated and changed through concrete interactions and experiences of 'ordinary' people. This thinking clearly challenges the position of the professional as the privileged keeper of specialist knowledge, and the right of the professional to develop and define what is to count as valid knowledge. Moreover, postmodernism recognises the *interpretive* (Ife 1995, p.131) and *reflective* (Fook 1996) nature of knowledge, both perspectives challenging the idea that professional knowledge is necessarily 'objective' and unchangeable.

A related pressure is a disaffection with 'professional dominance' (Friedson 1970) and the call for professions to be more accountable and transparent in their dealings. The move towards evidence-based practice (EBP) can be seen as part of this trend. Although perspectives on what evidence-based practice actually entails may vary (Trinder 2000), it is safe to say that there is broad agreement that the movement hopes to ensure that professional practice is based on the best available knowledge of what constitutes effective methods. Whether or not enough or appropriate knowledge exists to constitute 'evidence' is another question. Because the EBP movement partly originated in a concern with the gap between clinical practice and research in medicine (Reynolds 2000), the discourse about EBP often assumes the rhetoric about research in this discipline. Hence some people may interpret the EBP push as associated with the pressure for professional practice to become more technologised (Rolfe 2000, p.196), and for professional practice research to be more positivistic and measurement-based. The debates about EBP in this sense may be caught up with the debates about different research paradigms and their appropriateness for professional practice research.

The concern with EBP is part of a much bigger debate about the types of thinking and approaches to research which are most relevant for professional practice. As I have argued earlier, these debates are tied to our understanding of current social, cultural and economic changes on a global scale. In order for us as professionals to be more effective and responsive in our broader context, it is important that we also engage with these larger-scale debates, and not be restricted to the framework of the evidence-based practice movement. This is particularly important for professions outside medicine, because of the need to frame the debate in terms which are relevant to their own professions.

Let us summarise the broad dilemmas which arise for professionals in the current context. They involve three main themes:

1. The need to practise effectively in uncertain and complex contexts when the possibility and desirability of certain and unchangeable knowledge are also called into question.
2. The concern to provide value-based service in an increasingly technocratised environment.
3. The need to maintain position and credibility in an environment calling for increased accountability and transparency.

What professionals need therefore in the current environment is a legitimate form of knowledge, and legitimate forms of generating knowledge, which allow for effective and responsive practice in changing,

complex and uncertain environments. In addition, they need to be able to provide service in technocratised terms, but also to relate these technologies to service values and ideals. Third, they need to be able to establish and maintain their legitimacy in order to retain some influence on the way services are delivered - which should not be at the expense of service users or the community or even other professional groups.

With these themes in mind, the concern for evidence-based practice can be framed as part of a broader need; professionals need to find ways of researching and understanding their practice knowledge in both *responsive* and *responsible* ways. The need in this sense is for responsive and *responsible* practice -this includes the use of evidence, but it also includes the imperative to match professional practice and knowledge with the situation at hand. This is both a more extensive and a much more complex idea than the use of evidence in practice.

A concept of professional expertise

It is difficult to imagine what specific forms such responsive and responsible professional practice might take. Is it possible to frame an understanding of our expertise in ways that take account of complexities, situational changes, and precarious political tensions and interests? In this section I digress slightly to look in more detail at how these sorts of challenges might affect our notions of what is involved in professional practice and expertise. I include this section because I believe it will assist in developing a more detailed understanding of the directions our research should take. I draw this material from an extensive recent study I undertook with some colleagues (Fook, Ryan and Hawkins 2000) on the actual practice of social and community development workers. The research attempted both to identify some characteristics of professional expertise based on specific accounts of practice, and to frame these characteristics in ways which addressed these challenges (Fook 2000). The main features which emerged are examined below.

Contextuality is a major feature of professional expertise. This refers to the ability to work in and with the whole context or situation. This ability requires a knowledge of how differing and competing factors influence a situation. In this sense the main focus of the professional's attention is the whole context, rather than specific aspects or players within it. The expert professional simply assumes that the pathway to understanding is to understand the whole context, and the different perspectives which are part and parcel of this. Similarly, the pathway to relevant practice is through working with the whole context. This orientation of contextuality involves a type of *connectedness*, as discussed by Belenky *et al.* (1986, p.113), in which the knower recognises the need to connect with the viewpoints and experiences of others on the road to self-knowledge and learning.

Knowledge and theory creation are related to contextuality in that they involve the ability to generate knowledge and theory which is relevant to changing contexts. This means that professionals are constantly engaged with situations in such a way that they are not just modifying existing knowledge, but are in fact creating new knowledge which is relevant to newly experienced and often changing situations. As Eraut (1994, p.54) points out, the skill of using knowledge relevantly in a particular situation involves the skill of creating new knowledge about how to do this. The ability to create new knowledge relevant to context is a skill which can therefore readily be transferred across contexts. The feature of *transferability* is therefore *a major alternative to that of generalisability*. What becomes important to the practitioner is the extent to which knowledge can be transferred, and made contextually *relevant rather than generalisable*. In more modernist conceptions, abstract generalised theories are deductively applied to make sense of newly encountered situations. Existing meanings are imposed. In a more

postmodern conception, meaning is created inductively from the experience at hand. There is a sense of uncertainty about this:

... there is certainty yet I am comfortable with uncertainty ...I have gone from uncertainty and hesitation about my role to developing confidence in that role ...but also at the same time, to live with uncertainty, which is OK and good; if you stay uncertain, you'll stay striving towards... (Fook et al. 2000, Chapter 9)

Since the creation of meaning becomes an important skill, this places emphasis on the *processual* nature of professional expertise. Practitioners generally do not foreclose on interpretations or outcomes. Instead, practice and theory are often mutually negotiated with the players in the situation. This openness to the service user's experience, and the engaging in a process which enables them to communicate it, is related to the decision of some experienced workers not to use preconceived theory, but rather to try to remain as open to the situation as possible and to 'play it by ear'. It was as if they were willing to risk uncertainty, for the sake of constructing the most relevant process and outcome for service users. One worker states, in relation to her sense of social work theory: 'each person is creating their own...useful practice is allowing clients to experience their own paradoxes and contradictions' (Fook et al. 2000, Chapter 7).

If knowledge and theory creation are integral features of professional expertise then skills of *reflexivity and critical reflexivity* are also involved. Reflexivity, in one sense, is related to the skill of theory creation as embodied in the *reflective process* first discussed by Argyris and Schon (1974). They argued that theory is embedded in practice, and that practitioners therefore develop theory inductively out of ongoing experience. It is this theory which can be articulated and better developed through a reflective process. Professional expertise therefore involves the ability to reflect upon, and develop theory from, practice. However, reflexivity refers also to the ability to locate oneself squarely within a situation, and to know and take into account the influence of personal interpretation, position and action within a specific context. Expert practitioners are reflexive in that they are self-knowing and responsible actors, rather than detached observers. They are critically reflexive if they also hold a commitment to challenging power relations and arrangements (Fook 1999).

A tension that practitioners grapple with is how to retain meaning and a broader sense of purpose when contexts change, and are often contradictory. How do expert practitioners maintain the will to constantly recreate theory, and keep themselves open to new situations, all the while juggling conflicts? How do we keep the faith to attain a collective 'good', at the same time not foreclosing on what that good might be by incorporating diverse and conflicting perspectives?

An answer perhaps lies in a pathway that many of our experienced practitioners had forged. Experts appear to subscribe to a broader level of values which transcends the immediate workplace. It may take the form of a commitment to the profession, to social justice ideals, or to a system of humanitarian and social values. Elsewhere this has been termed a 'calling' (Gustafson 1982), which encapsulates the moral vision of professions like social work. This commitment to a higher order of values allows workers to maintain a grounded yet transcendent vision. It allows them to be fully aware of, and responsive to, the daily conflicts of practice situations, yet also allows them to pursue broader goals which make the daily dilemmas meaningful. It might be said that they have developed a construct of professional social work expertise which allows for uncertainty and conflict, and also for a sense of ultimate direction. They are aware of constraints, but, like some of the students in Hindmarsh's study (1992, p.232), are not disempowered by this awareness. They can act as involved and participating players because they have a meaning system which makes it worthwhile.

In summary,

... expert professionals are grounded in specific contexts [and] relate to the whole context... They interact, reflexively and responsively in these contexts, recognising multiple viewpoints, conflicts and complexities.

As flexible practitioners ...they engage in a process ...using a range of skills... They use this knowledge creatively, from diverse sources, and are able to relate and create this knowledge in the specific context, and thus transfer it relevantly to other contexts. Although grounded in specific contexts, they are able to transcend the constraints of these because ...their broader vision gives them meaning and a sense of continuity... they are therefore able to deal with uncertainty by maintaining a higher order of meaning which is flexible enough to adapt and respond to continual change. (Fook et al., 2000, p.97)

What professionals need

How do these ideas of professional expertise square up against the current dilemmas which professionals face? From our earlier section it is possible to summarise the current situation as involving a crisis on three counts: knowledge, values and legitimacy.

It appears that professional expertise, as practised by current professionals, already involves the ability to use and develop knowledge in a flexible way in order to practise effectively in changing and uncertain situations. They can also learn to transfer relevant knowledge between contexts. Expert professionals are also able to maintain a sense of values, of ongoing mission and service, despite the particular challenges to this in the specific job. What is less developed from the above material are the ways in which professional expertise can be both legitimated and remain accountable in a changing economic and community context.

We need a research agenda, therefore, which recognises and continues to identify the ways in which professionals create and develop relevant and flexible knowledge through their own practice. We also need research which showcases the ways in which professionals maintain their value base and sense of mission, and which indeed contributes to this mission. Last, we need research which can legitimate our work in a number of new and different ways.

A research agenda for professionals

The above discussion indicates a number of major ways in which research can contribute to the developing position of professionals in the current climate. I have grouped the research directions into five main types, picking up the themes discussed above. I discuss the research directions needed around knowledge development and transferability of knowledge. With regard to the issue of maintaining a mission of service, I discuss the need for professional research to make a social contribution. In relation to the need for legitimation, I discuss both legitimation and accountability, as I believe the issues go hand in hand. Last, I outline research directions related to workplace development, as they involve changing notions of professional practice as defined by labour market changes.

Knowledge development

To respond to the current demands for accountability in a changing environment, the development of professional knowledge involves two major needs: to ensure that standards are maintained and that practice is improved. As noted earlier, these are the concerns of the EBP movement, yet there are more complex issues at stake as well as the need to ground practice in proven methods. It is one thing to provide clear data or 'evidence' in situations which are known and testable. It is a far more complex task to ensure standards and improvement in situations which are new and relatively unresearched or 'unresearchable'.

Therefore one of the directions research in the area of professional knowledge development needs to take is to focus on areas which are relatively under-researched and which might traditionally have been regarded as unresearchable, or difficult to measure or identify. These might include practice with complexities (Gibbs 2001), value-based practice, or holistic practice. Research on the tacit aspects of 'practice wisdom' is both particularly difficult and particularly important (Scott 1990; Fook 2001). Some examples of such research might include evaluations which include a range of methods (ranging from 'subjective' to 'objective'); studies which focus on the types of knowledge professionals create and the ways they use them; research which is practitioner- or practice-focused; research which aims to identify the more implicit or tacit features of practice; and research which is multi-perspectival (that is, it includes the views of a variety of different players in the situation, such as service users, managers, colleagues, etc.).

A range of new and old methods and their combination might usefully serve these purposes. For instance, narrative, deconstructive or reflective methods might be used to analyse practitioner accounts of practice, and the results compared with service user perceptions of outcome to provide several different perspectives. Some of the recent social work research emerging from Finland (Karvinen, Poso and Satka 1999) very nicely illustrates the use of a range of newer methods and a commitment to researching from the practitioner's perspective (Juhila and Poso 1999; Jokinen and Suoninen 1999) and to acknowledging the difficulties in practice (Metteri 1999).

Transferability

In order to respond to the need for professional knowledge to be more flexible, the idea of transferability is useful. As discussed earlier, this involves the ability to contextualise knowledge, and thus the ability to transfer what is relevant across contexts. This involves an ability to create the knowledge about how to apply knowledge in different situations (Eraut 1994, p.54). It also involves the ability to work out which knowledge is specific to certain contexts or domains, and which is relevant elsewhere (Fook *et al.* 2000, p.245). For example, knowledge about workplace culture might be specific to a particular workplace, but knowledge about how to identify workplace culture might be transferable.

This clearly indicates several different types of research studies: a focus on the sorts of knowledge practitioners transfer between different jobs or roles is an obvious one. An examination of how practitioners use or modify knowledge across different contexts would be helpful, as well as a study of how practitioners create knowledge in the process of engaging with new situations.

Again, a mix of methods might be used, ranging from more quantitative ones which attempt to codify the types of knowledge used and the processes involved, to more inductive methods which attempt to identify ideas which are less immediately obvious.

Social contribution

It is a challenge for current professionals to both make a social contribution and remain true to their mission of service in a climate of competitive economic employment. Professional research is needed which both validates the value base of professional practice and emphasises its broader social contribution.

Much literature specific to particular professions emphasises this need. For example, in social work many writers note the imperative that research should contribute to the social justice mission of the profession (McDermott 1996; Denzin 2001). However, there might be several different directions research can take to meet these needs. For instance, the research might focus on the needs of

disadvantaged or marginal groups; it might involve these groups in the research process; or it might be about professional practice with such groups. From another perspective, in order to validate the social contribution of the professions, it might be appropriate for research to focus on the sorts of social impact which professional work has made.

Last, it is imperative to research the ways in which professionals maintain and enact their values in their everyday practice. What is value-based practice and how effective is it? Does it, and if so how does it, differ from practice which is more technologically driven? What values do professionals adhere to and what strengthens them? What meaning is derived from their work and how do they see their values affecting the way they practise?

Again a variety of methods and designs are necessary. Deconstructive analyses of practice might unearth hidden values, whereas interviews and surveys might allow a clearer assessment of stated values and their impact. Evaluative measures of social impact might be relevant in tracing the broad effects of professional input.

Legitimation and accountability

On a broad level, social legitimation for professionals is about gaining and maintaining the authority and position to practise in a chosen way and to exercise influence accordingly. Current challenges involve maintaining this position for the collective good, when the push is towards breaking down such hierarchical divisions from both management and community perspectives. As I argued earlier, it is possible that moves to legitimate professional knowledge and standing do not necessarily undermine the respective positions of managers or service users or even of other colleagues. What is needed is an approach to professional knowledge which justifies its distinctive value in a number of ways, so that diverse interest groups are aware of how they can benefit from particular types of professional expertise. In other words, what professionals need to be able to do is to communicate about, or translate their expertise to, other groups like managers, community members and service users, so that they can see the benefits in their terms. This is a form of being able to 'sell' their expertise to other groups who might have different understandings of their needs.

In this way, legitimation also becomes a form of accountability, in that the process of legitimating professional expertise and knowledge to other groups is also a process of justifying the benefits to that group. Accountability and legitimation are therefore about communicating about, and ensuring the relevance of, professional expertise. In this sense, we are talking about legitimation based on accountability, rather than on pursuing social position through other structural and cultural means (e.g. through salary levels, legislation, educational level, etc.). Neither precludes the other, of course, but this perspective on legitimation indicates some strong directions for research.

With the idea of accountability being based on justification of relevance and communication of this to the diverse groups concerned, there are several major directions which professional research can take. One of the most straightforward ways in which this can be done is of course through already accepted means like collaborative (Baldwin 2000) or participative (Wadsworth 2001) approaches. Brulin (2001) notes the use of an action research approach in encouraging university research to serve community interests. Perhaps it is useful to think of these approaches and designs as also being new forms of accountability whereby ownership of and responsibility for the research are shared, and top-down relations between interest groups minimised.

However, as a general principle it is useful to be mindful of the many different ways in which research can be made more relevant - collaborative designs may not be practicable in many instances.

One of the most basic starting points is simply the imperative to ensure that the reasons and motivations for the research are couched in the language and meaning system of the groups to whom it is accountable. In this sense, it is the way the material is communicated which is important, as well as the topic and substance of the research itself.

With this in mind, the research itself might become an exercise in translating the discourse of professional expertise into the discourse of managers, the discourse of other colleagues, or the thinking of service users. This idea of research as *translation exercise* (Steier 1991, p.177) is important in helping us reformulate our research directions. It indicates that we need to think of research to legitimate our professions as research which translates what we do into the language and thinking of the groups for whom and with whom we work. In this process, of course, we will find new ways to talk about, think about, and improve our work. It is also a new way of valuing and validating our work.

For instance, we might undertake some studies which aim to develop a new language for framing our practice, in terms which speak to the current debates. The professional expertise study which I undertook with my colleagues, referred to earlier in this chapter (Fook *et al.* 2000), is an example of this type of research. Research which looks at how current practice is evidence-based, and the different ways in which it is so based, would also be performing a similar function. Many studies of professional practice could contain a component of discourse analysis, providing the basis for a reframing of the discourse.

Sometimes studies might need to focus on how professional, more value-based discourse might translate into more technological frames - one need not necessarily replace the other, but studies which compared the commonalities between the two might function to facilitate better relations. Lists of competencies might prove useful, either as points of comparison, or as a basis for devising new lists. Studies might also be undertaken which compare frames of understanding between management, professional and service user groups, with a view to developing common frames of reference. In this way all views might be validated.

Workplace and inter professional concerns

It is important that research speaks to the current concerns of the workplace in which professionals are employed. This involves economic, management, inter-organisational and inter-professional issues. While in a way I have already addressed these in broad terms, there are more specific issues concerning how professionals are legitimated and made accountable in their specific workplace which I have not discussed. For instance, given the changing nature of employment, which is less tied to pure professional qualifications, it is important that different professional groups also learn to speak a common language. Also, because of mixed funding arrangements, divisions between organisations are becoming more blurred and more complex.

Inter-professional and inter-organisational issues might be addressed through research which focuses on cross-disciplinary and organisational collaborations or teamwork. In particular, the study of how models of practice are devised which accommodate different professional cultures would provide useful data.

Since employment contracts are often more short term and more programme-specific, it is important that we understand how professional practice is grounded in, and also how it transcends, specific employment contexts. Models and documentation of best practice in these new and changing contexts would be invaluable.

Again, a variety of methods and approaches might perform such functions. Professions and organisations can be compared in any number of ways, ranging from surveys of perceptions and opinion, to the use of established instruments (such as competency lists), to interviews and observations of work, to document analysis. Best-practice models might be developed and documented using a wide variety of methods as well. For instance, journalling, focus groups or reflective methods could be used to draw out common themes or practice principles (Dadds and Hart 2001).

An approach to research for professionals: Beyond evidence-based practice

In this chapter I have taken the view that our broad understanding of professionalism and professional practice needs to undergo review in the current context of changes. While the EBP movement is a major feature of the current context, I have argued that the broader social and global context also shapes who we are as professionals. I have tried to outline a view of how professionals, and professional research, can address challenges which are more far-reaching than the EVP debate. These challenges, of knowledge, of values and of legitimation, require research directions which support professionals in developing knowledge which is more flexible and transferable; practice which is value-based and makes a social contribution; and ways of legitimating their social position which also provide accountability.

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