

See Me! Biographies of the Hidden City

GORNALL, Lesley <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8534-9177>>

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Published version

GORNALL, Lesley (2018). See Me! Biographies of the Hidden City. The Qualitative Report.

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*See Me! Biographies of the Hidden City
Proposing Research as Advocacy*

Author

Lesley Gornall, Department of Social Work, Social Care and Community Studies, Sheffield Hallam University, UK

l.gornall@shu.ac.uk

Abstract

Cooper and Whyte (eds. 2017) outline the violent and isolating impact of austerity policies on increasing numbers of vulnerable people across the UK. The concerns outlined are reinforced by an increasing body of research, providing further evidence of the factual basis of the damning country report by the United Nations Human Rights Committee (2016).

Despite the increasingly compelling body of evidence, and an indictment of the policy focus delivered in the results of the 2016 General election, there are only the smallest of changes to national policy, and the people affected most 'denied recognition', (Honneth 1995), disconnected at a structural level, socially invisible, prey to stigma and disdain. This paper introduces a research programme aiming to overcome that disconnect and link the lived experiences and hidden narratives of austerity across a city with those with the power to effect local change.

Keywords: austerity, biographical methods, policy influence, invisibility, disconnect, exclusion, lived experience

“The master relates himself to the bondsman immediately through independent existence, for that is precisely what keeps the bondsman in thrall; it is his chain, from which he could not in the struggle get away, and for that reason he proved himself to be dependent, to have his independence in the shape of thinghood. The master, however, is the power controlling this state of existence, for he has shown in the struggle that he holds it to be merely something negative. Since he is the power dominating existence, while this existence again is the power controlling the other [the bondsman], the master holds, par consequence, this other in subordination. In the same way the master relates himself to the thing mediately through the bondsman. The bondsman being a self-consciousness in the broad sense, also takes up a negative attitude to things and cancels them; but the thing is, at the same time, independent for him and, in consequence, he cannot, with all his negating, get so far as to annihilate it outright and be done with it; that is to say, he merely works on it.” (Hegel 1807, p. 190)

Introduction, Context and Rationale

On June 24 2016, the referendum result meaning that the UK would leave the European Union became public, and the United Nations Human Rights Committee published the periodic country report on the UK. The report contains some very real concerns about the UK's increasingly questionable role internationally, specifically in the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees, divisive use of aid allocations, and role in the proliferation of arms and armed conflict, the report also outlines a total of 74 immediate action points to safeguard the human rights of UK citizens. In the bruising aftermath of a referendum campaign harnessing anxiety and isolation of people living in the nations regions away from London, creating social divides, and a wave of xenophobic attacks, the report was given only minimal media coverage. Whilst there are very specific recommendations relating to the rights of vulnerable people in the UK, predominantly women, children and people with disabilities, the first recommendation is an overarching comment on the commitment of the current UK Government to repeal the 1998 Human Rights Act, and to seek public consultation on the issue:

“It also recommends that the State party take all necessary measures to ensure that any new legislation in this regard is aimed at enhancing the status of human rights, including economic, social and cultural rights in the domestic legal order, and provide effective protection of those rights across all jurisdictions of the State party. The Committee recalls its previous recommendation (E/C.12/GBR/CO/5, para. 10) and urges the State party to take all necessary measures to expedite the adoption of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.” (UN Human Rights Committee, 2016 p.1)

Within this overarching issue of commitment to safeguarding the Human Rights of British Citizens, there are very clearly articulated issues in terms of regulating business practices both within the UK and of businesses operating internationally; of ensuring legal rights and powers continue to exist, and that the current fiscal policy

“such as the increase to the inheritance tax limit and to the Value Added Tax, as well as the gradual reduction of the tax on corporate incomes, are having on the ability of the State party to address persistent social inequality and to collect sufficient resources to achieve the full realization of economic, social and cultural rights for the benefit of disadvantaged and marginalized individuals and groups.” UN Human Rights Committee, 2016 p.1)

This is further related to an open letter in 2012 criticising the

“disproportionate adverse impact that austerity measures, introduced since 2010, are having on the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights by disadvantaged and marginalized individuals and groups..... measures must be temporary, necessary, proportionate, and not discriminatory and must not disproportionately affect the rights of disadvantaged and marginalized individuals and groups and respect the core content of rights.” (UNCRC 2012)

In this area, too, the committee recommended a full enquiry, impact assessment, and consultation. An independent enquiry may well have raised questions as to the nature and cause of difficulties in public finance. In the aftermath of the global financial crisis, bailout 'loan' payments to banks totalled £1.162 trillion, the absence of the loan repayments in deficit calculations was an obvious omission, the subsequent sale of the public shareholding in the banks at a loss, a too little known explanation of the UK's balance sheet. In a surprising move, an 'overview' consultation on the government came in the form of a snap general election in June 2017. Whilst BREXIT was still a major, potentially diversionary, feature, the impact of austerity did play a major part, the exclusion and anger which largely fueled the BREXIT vote turned full circle and the electorate delivered a resounding, but not fatal blow to a government which continues to pursue an ideology of austerity propped up by the Democratic Unionist Party of Northern Ireland clearly cited in the UNHRC Report as a source of oppression of human rights in Northern Ireland, and recommending a specific Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, a situation of which, until now the British public was generally unaware.

The UNCRC report is damning, yet it has never been fully discussed in parliament, it has been mentioned but not dissected in the media. The UN Human Rights Council Periodic Review of the UK in 2017 relates back to recommendations made in 2012, and has repeated issues relating to the withdrawal from the UN Convention on Human Rights, the rights of women, children, asylum seekers, workers, effective civic debate, and a very clear statement to "strengthen measures for the eradication of poverty and ensure welfare of all segments of society in an inclusive manner"

Yet, in early 2018, the statistics clearly demonstrate that the situation continues to worsen for significant numbers of British people, that poverty now applies to almost half the children in the UK, that the average wage falls below the poverty line in some areas, and that both local authorities and public services are failing to provide effective responses to need.

In November 2016 Bristol City Council suspended all maintenance activity due to financial issues, in March 2017, the Chancellor announced a further 18% cut to public sector funding, in February 2018 Northamptonshire County Council is formally filing for bankruptcy. Watkins, et al (2017) study in the British Medical Journal "demonstrates that recent constraints in Public Expenditure on Health and Public Expenditure on Social Care in England were associated with nearly 45 000 higher than expected numbers of deaths between 2012 and 2014. If these trends continue, even when considering the increased planned funding as of 2016, we estimate approximately 150 000 additional deaths may arise between 2015 and 2020." The winter of 2017/18 has seen the most challenging winter yet for National Health Service Hospitals, with queues in the corridors of accident and emergency departments, and waits of up to 14 hours, lack of staff, lack of equipment, teachers are reporting that they are providing materials in schools, Carillion

one of the biggest private contractors to the public sector has filed for bankruptcy, the system is in a state of rapid decay, and poverty is increasing. Research completed by Loughborough University on behalf of The End Poverty campaign points out that there are areas in the UK where over half the children are growing up in poverty. (<http://www.endchildpoverty.org.uk/more-than-half-of-children-now-living-in-poverty-in-some-parts-of-the-uk/>) A child is said to live in poverty if they are in a family living on less than 60% of median household income. According to the latest official statistics 60% of median income (after housing costs) was around £248 per week. To find the relevant poverty line for a particular household type, this then needs to be adjusted to take account of household size. For a couple with two children under 14 this means multiplying by 1.4 – giving a poverty line of £347 per week. The Office of National Statistics reports the median weekly income before housing costs as £511 in November 2017. Nationwide, the average monthly rent for 2 bedrooms is £926, (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-23234033>), just under half of the median income of £2 044 monthly, and leaving £1 048, £262 a week, £100 below the poverty line for families. In parts of the UK the average salary effectively means living in poverty.

One of the very obvious, but often ‘unrecognised’ impacts of austerity is homelessness. According to the government’s own statistics is rising. Local authorities’ counts and estimates show that 4,751 people slept rough in England on a snapshot night in autumn 2017. This is up 617 (15%) from the autumn 2016 total of 4,134. In 2010 this total was 1,768 – more than doubled since austerity came into being. The homeless charity Shelter reports that 300 000 people, 1 in 200 are homeless, not including the hidden homeless who are sofa surfing. The Audit Office, in a damning report citing government failure to act points out that “there were 77,240 households in temporary accommodation in England in March 2017, an increase of 60% since March 2011. These households included 120,540 children, an increase of 73% from March 2011. Homelessness at present costs the public sector in excess of £1 billion a year. More than three quarters of this – £845 million – was spent on temporary accommodation. Three quarters of this spending – £638 million – was funded by housing benefit.” Private rents are a major issue, and “in the capital have risen by 24% since the start of the decade, while average earnings have increased by just 3%”. At the same time the base rate remains at 0.5%, meaning that food and fuel increases of between 20 and 25% are being mitigated by lower mortgage prices for older people established on the housing market often paying less to buy, than younger people to rent. The harsh reality of this ‘brutalisation of the social conflict’ is cash strapped local authorities actively making people invisible, adding spikes to doorways, adding rails to public seating so that homeless people are unable to use them to sleep, Windsor local authority asking the police to make sure the ‘beggars’ are removed from the streets for the duration of the royal wedding. (Guardian, January 2018). In December 2017, the deaths of 3 homeless people in York, Bournemouth and Manchester were reported, there are probably more. The

right to food is also under threat. Between 1st April 2016 and 31st March 2017, The Trussell Trust's Foodbank Network provided 1,182,954 three day emergency food supplies to people in crisis compared to 1,109,309 in 2015-16. An 8% increase, amid reports of professionals such as nurses using foodbanks. The Royal College of Nursing commissioned research conducted by the Institute of Employment Studies found that from a sample of 7720, 2.3% had indeed used foodbanks. Just as alarmingly, 11% had missed mortgage payments, 23% had taken additional work, 40% of these over 10 hours a week. 40% had borrowed money. Given that nurses salary is generally on a par with other public sector employees: teachers, police officers, fire fighters, college and university lecturers, administrators, those in the service sector of public service, all with pay increases capped at 1%, a real cut of 14% since 2010, food poverty is very likely to be reflected across the public sector. The British Medical Association (2017) reports that "recent estimates suggest that one in three people in the UK has, at some stage in their life, experienced relative poverty. The causes of poverty are complex and intertwined. They include unemployment, low-paid work, inadequate benefit entitlements, and lack of affordable housing. There are also various social risk factors including having a disability, being a carer, and being part of a lone-parent or large family" – a reflection of the vulnerable groups highlighted by the UN Human Rights Committee, all at risk of poor physical and mental health, cognitive and physical developmental delay in children. Cooper and Whyte (2017) draw very clear links between increased levels of suicide resulting from the impact of austerity measures and associated poverty.

As Fareld (2012) notes, "when Hegelian recognition anew enters the intellectual debate at the beginning of the twenty-first century, its focus is not on questions of cultural identity and multiculturalism but on issues of vulnerability and exclusion in relation to migration and state violence". State violence which Cooper and Whyte (2017) describe as the result of austerityamplified by the construction of a political solitude and severance from other countries' post – BREXIT. This is a political solitude which has the diminution of a nation's human rights at its core, a 'knowing' diminution, dismissing a compelling body of evidence relating to the harm to individual and community, and ignoring recommendations relating to the rights of citizens. This willful ignorance of impact is demonstrated not only by the suppression of reports and impact evaluations, but by the Tory governments persistent mockery of questions, largely related to the impact of austerity policies, posed by the electorate, during Prime Ministers' Question Time, a very public refusal to 'recognise' the people they represent.

The political arena in the UK has long been characterized by debates around inclusion and exclusion. Social policies such as 'Welfare to Work', or the establishment of units such as the Social Exclusion Unit have hitherto indicated a core articulated goal of both major parties to enable access to opportunities to participate in the 'economic, social and cultural' (UN Human Rights Council) life of the country. This has changed. In creating a system

with competition at its core, the neoliberal project has not only exacerbated inequalities, but, by insisting on swingeing budget cuts, competitive tendering, and quantitative commissioning, it has transformed state agencies from enablers, to enforcers. Workfare and benefits assessments, including disability benefit assessments are linked to sanctions and growing numbers of deaths. Even those organisations traditionally most focused on social justice are bound in an annual round of commissioning and tendering for services and are drifting into tacit compliance and collusion with state violence as a result.

“The violence of austerity is a bureaucratized form of violence that is implemented in routine and mundane ways.....Not only do institutions help to convert policies from an abstract level to a material one, they are the very sites through which highly political strategies, like austerity, are de-politicised and their harmful effect made to appear normal and mundane. “(Cooper et al 2017, p3).

The routine and mundane nature of the violent impact of austerity has a normalising effect on the population. The onslaught of bad news stories causes people to defend themselves, to protect themselves from the distress. Whether stories of refugees, queues in hospital corridors, children with scurvy and rickets, the volume, for many, is simply too much to handle initiating an emotional shut down, or protective barrier. For other, a naturally authoritarian, or latent authoritarian (Stenner, 2005) personality may come to the fore, and rather than examine the causes of individual challenges and pain, there is a tendency to blame others, most likely others who are different, thereby feeding the xenophobia, misogyny, homophobia and mistreatment of people with disabilities which is evidently growing. Whether as a result of the emotional shut down, or authoritarian blame culture, for those suffering the impact of a violent austerity, the impact is beyond social exclusion and disenfranchisement, increasingly, it is invisibility.

The growth of inequalities across the world resulting from neoliberal policies are well documented (Cooper et al (2017) [www.equalitytrust](http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk), Oxfam 2017), yet

“There has not been moral indignation in the face of mass denial of social recognition, there are no signs to be seen of an increase in public outcries; instead, the struggle for recognition seems essentially frozen on the outside and to have essentially been interiorized, be it in the form of greater fears of failure or in the form of cold, impotent rage. So, what has happened to the conflicts over social self-respect in the midst of all this oppressive silence, interrupted as it is only on occasion superficially by journalistic coverage? What shapes has the struggle for recognition since assumed? (...)in the sphere of economic competition for status, the core principle has now lost any meaning as a moral precept and is no longer the social guarantee of a claim in principle to recognition for one's own achievements; instead it has become a wall with which to defend against demands made from below. When the institutionally enshrined principles of recognition are emptied of

semantic content in this way, it spells various things for those who possess all the civil rights, but whose employment situation has already become precarious.”(Honneth, 2012, p17-18)

Beyond the obsession with economic forces and financial status, the current deteriorating situation in the UK means an increasingly precarious situation across the population. Not only are unemployed people facing challenges of maintaining homes and adequate food, but the ‘working poor’ and professionals are also using foodbanks, wage stagnation matched with food fuel and rent inflation running at 20-25%. In extreme cases, people are living in vehicles, or on the streets and using leisure centre facilities to shower before going to work. Honneth’s (2012) ‘normative interpretations’ for spheres of recognition are being reduced, thus leading to a ‘barbarization’ a non – recognition of a growing ‘underclass’:

“An increasing number of society's members depend on compensatory, non-public paths for acquiring self-respect, and ever fewer of them can lay claim to intersubjectively shared recognition for their aspirations and accomplishments. Social conflict has thus been barbarized in the sense that the struggle for recognition in past decades has so emphatically lost its moral basis that it has been turned into an arena of decidedly rampant self-assertion.” (Honneth 2012, p1)

The rampant ‘self-assertion’ of those in power manifesting itself in a refusal to see those, to ‘recognise’ those who are suffering most, laughing at or dismissing their struggles to survive, to feed their families, to access healthcare, is tacitly supported by those who are either too emotionally exhausted, or too fearful, angry or even too bound in their own day to day challenges to ‘recognise’ the struggles of others and has created a sense of political as well as social invisibility. In their introduction to the special edition of *Distinktion* on social recognition, Carleheden, Heidegren and Willig outline the horror of invisibility:

“ We want to be loved; failing that, admired; failing that, feared; failing that, hated and despised. At all costs we want to stir up some sort of feeling in others. Our soul abhors a vacuum. At all costs it longs for contact. (Söderberg [1905] 2002, 70)

“This is the horror of being socially invisible. If you can’t love me, then at least detest and despise me! To make people disappear by refusing to take notice of them, by demonstratively seeing through them, is a form of disrespect to be distinguished from outright disrespect in the form of being the object of stigmatizing and devaluating attitudes, gestures, or actions. “ (Carleheden et al, 2012)

The psychological harm resulting from ‘non recognition’ or ‘misrepresentation’ (Taylor, 1997), is compounded by invisibility. In this sense, recognition is no longer a normative struggle for equality, it is a structural negation of the most basic human rights.

Whilst there is little sign of any change in central government policy, there are indicators of the potential for local and community action for change. In 2017

Salford Council gave all Social Care employees a 10% salary increase despite the 1% cap. Whilst the reality of this is an hourly rate of £8.30, and an annual salary of £17000, it is evidence of local resistance. In late 2017 the newly elected mayor of Manchester, Andy Burnham donated 15% of his salary to start a crowdfunding campaign in support of action to provide homes for those living on the streets, a campaign which has now reached over £100 000. The research programme outlined below will seek to develop a link between the people behind the statistics and inform local decision – making and action.

Pilot Programme

Research and Recognition

This research programme represents an attempt to combat the invisibility for those people affected most by austerity and ‘denied recognition’, (Honneth 1995), disconnected and actively ignored at a structural level, socially invisible, prey to stigma and disdain. Agreed dissemination of findings will seek to link the hidden narratives of austerity across a city with those able to effect local change. It will more fully analyse the impact of, and responses to, austerity at a local level across one industrial northern city. Using established local professional networks, the programme will initially provide results from a research pilot recording the biographies of one group of those ‘unseen’ lives touched by austerity, and seek to reconnect those biographies with policy makers, and social change agents, at least at a local level.

The aim of the pilot will be to trial approaches to supportive, research conversations which extend the concept of intersubjectivity to ‘recognise’ individual participants, and enable a ‘forum of participation’ (Delcroix & Inowlocki, 2007). In empowering people to co-produce local solutions to local issues, it is hoped that the research process will be a process of reconnection, rekindling a sense of control, ability to exercise influence over individual and community lives and, as a consequence, well-being. The life history – based research design will seek to identify pressure points, points of disconnection and potential re-connection, individual and collective biographies, with the potential for support, (re) actualisation and change, with a view to helping identify specific issues and solutions.

Aim and Overview

The research programme seeks to recognise and represent the hidden biographies of those members of society represented as statistics, social issues, within the context of geographical communities and/or communities of shared experience. The processes to achieve this derived from both an academic understanding of the “ legacy of feminist research, praxis, and activism” (Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2012) and a professional commitment to social change, built on the Freirean (1979) concept of ‘lived experience’ and reflexive dialogue as a means of empowerment and ownership of social change. In this sense, the process is a learning and empowering process, participants should

become aware both of those political and social forces acting against them, and of their own strength and right to act both for themselves, and others. It is important too, to recognise the impact of ‘lived experience’ of those in positions of power, the consequent divide which may exist, and the importance of advocacy, rather than confrontation in working for change.

Participants and Sampling

The initial pilot will focus on young adults, building on existing networks of both frontline professionals, and decision makers. Young people will self-select through an invitation to participate in the programme via organisations with whom they are in contact. In this initial stage, it is anticipated that they will represent some or all of the following groups: young people who are not in education, training or employment, young people who have a disability, young people experiencing mental health issues, young people who are experiencing homelessness or chaotic housing. Some participants may well experience a number of these issues, and, where appropriate, participants from different groups may be invited to explore ‘common biographies’.

Methodology

Stage 1 Collective Experiences in Individual Biographies A vital element of the programme will be trust and control of information. In order to clearly outline the aims of the programme, and offer an opportunity to develop trust, the first stage will be in groups. Recognising the potential for concentrated levels of poor literacy, the approach will be informal, activity – based, visual and creative, enabling groups to consider basic needs, aspirations, skills and how to achieve those aspirations, challenges, perceptions of how society helps them and views participants, and consider situations in which young people feel visible or invisible. Young people will have the opportunity to identify common themes and issues. Rather than a written form of collective biography (Gannon et al 2012) as a shared experience in its entirety, the aim will be to represent responses to shared stressors or enablers within individual life histories, and harness processes used in developmental groupwork. At this stage, young people will be asked if they would like to take part in an individual interview, and arrangements made. Analysis of stage 1 will be used to identify trends to inform the tools for stage 2. A report on the data collected will be available before the interview stage for young people to comment, change or confirm findings.

Participation in individual interviews will be voluntary, although it is planned to make a small donation to the organisation in recognition of young people’s time and commitment.

Stage 2 Individual Life Histories

Open biographical individual interviews will have prompts relating to effective support/interventions and positive experiences, and negative impacts on their life history to date. Perceptions of future challenges aspirations and

what would enable them to achieve their goals. Consideration of the impact of the views of others. The interview framework will be based on that used in the evaluation of the CHOICES Programme for interventions with young people experiencing category 3 drug and alcohol issues. (Gornall et al 2013 & 2016). This framework is based on asking to participants to talk about positive and challenging experiences in their lives to date, what they see as enablers of barriers to their success to date. Followed by a focus on future aspirations and those opportunities and interventions which might enable or hinder them in achieving their goals. The outline will be updated to include prompts reflecting the initial perceptions of visibility /invisibility in society, and specific challenges facing particular groups.

Analysis

As research aimed at representing the ‘lived experience’ of individual people, findings will largely be presented as case studies. Key questions of those factors which have contributed to current difficulties, and those which have or could help overcome them can be compared both within and across groups to identify trends and themes. In addition to collating and comparing responses to particular prompts, a thematic analysis will be undertaken of whole interviews. An overview of grouped case studies will identify, trends, solutions, excluding factors, and outliers, without losing focus on the overall aim of presenting individual stories. All reports will be confirmed with participants before any dissemination is undertaken.

Ethics

As a programme founded on presenting unseen and unheard life stories, it is hoped the process will reflect Hegel’s concept of an ethical undertaking “Sittlichkeit, Research will be hosted by partner organisations working with young people and adults in informal learning and support settings. Organisational and professional values are embedded in the research in terms of confidentiality, respect, right to withdraw, control of data and commitment to confirm both content and dissemination of final studies, and will comply with university guidance. Safeguarding will comply with both organisation and university safeguarding procedures, and key workers will be available in case of distress. Both group activities and individual interviews will be built on a clear definition of the researcher’s role and potentially short term nature of the relationship. At the same time, respect and trust will be important to develop responsive dialogue, which is built on empathy and recognition of both challenges facing young people, and their successes in overcoming them.

Dissemination: Forum of Participation

The links between participatory research, empowerment and community development are integral to this proposal. Freire’s (1979) concept of ‘praxis’ with reflexive dialogue as the foundation of effective social action and change.. Ensuring ownership is maintained by participants of any published

information is fundamental to this approach, and dissemination will be in the form and process agreed. Given that the programme will be outlined as providing an opportunity to share the realities of living in marginalized groups with limited rights, and low or no visibility, establishing a route to share information with those in power is vital. In this way, the researcher becomes advocate. For the pilot, those links exist between academics training professionals, professionals and decision – makers within the local authority. Subject to agreement, a Forum of Participation (Delcroix and Inomlocki, 2007) in the form of project – based web media, links to existing media, or further dissemination to employers, educators, community representatives, University communities of practice, is envisaged as a means of gaining further recognition, and potentially inclusion and practical help for participants. Similarly, the ideal would be for young people to represent themselves with decision – makers and agents of social change, where necessary this will be supported by an advocacy role, or preparatory meetings.

Potential Challenges

This research programme is clearly a response to a damning indictment by the United Nations Human Rights Committee of the impact of government policies and rhetoric on human rights in the UK, and in – depth analysis of related data. As such, the perspective is clearly one of anti–austerity. The aim, however, is not to debate economic policy, but to present the ‘lived experiences’ of people in challenging circumstances to those with the power and influence to instigate a process of reflective dialogue and action to enable positive change at a local level. The commitment to confirming all published data with participants will mediate against interpretation and bias.

Future Development

At the time of writing, the proposal is awaiting ethical approval for the pilot. The pilot is based on existing networks of those working with very vulnerable and ‘unseen’ young people, and hopefully to follow up individual stories and provide a more longitudinal data set. Plans are already in place to expand the programme to work with food banks and pantries, adults using specific services and homeless people. It will be important to adapt and as situations require to safeguard both participants and researcher. In the longer term, the potential to train student volunteers in the use of tried and tested research methods to develop a consistent source of information for local decision – making will be explored.

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