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DON'T DO WHAT I DO – JUST BLOODY WELL DO WHAT I SAY! THE WORKPLACE BULLYING EXPERIENCES OF AUSTRALIAN ACADEMICS

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Abstract

Workplace bullying is a silent epidemic permeating our workplaces. Bullying is a broad, typically imprecisely used term encompassing a wide variety of phenomena – but all definitions contain the element of power in one form or another. Workplace bullying has been attributed to a combination of business economic rationalism, downsizing, conflictual work environments and limited worker participation in management decisions. This paper explores the types of bullying experienced by general and academic staff in four Australian universities. By employing a schoolyard bullying analogy it is possible to categorise their experiences into: gatekeeper bullying; sandpit bullying; toilet bullying; and king bullying. Moreover, it appears that collegiality is protecting the university bully – victims are reluctant to pursue the bullying issue fearing ridicule or isolation by colleagues.

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INTRODUCTION

Some of us may have been the victim of a school bully, and most of us can remember someone being bullied in the school playground. Not surprisingly, research suggests that childhood bullies move on to become adult [and probably workplace] bullies (Kiesker & Marchant 1999). Bullying and other forms of occupational violence are workplace hazards that have gained increasing attention both in Australia and internationally in recent years. There is growing recognition of the effects of workplace bullying on staff morale, reduced commitment, and retention rates. There are both financial and psychological costs associated with workplace bullying behaviour: stress-related illnesses; absteeism; poor, or reduced employee performance, and potential adverse public publicity for employers. Bullies occupy boardroom suites; they roam factory floors, hospital corridors, offices and classrooms. Bullying occurs in blue and white-collar occupations alike and occurs regardless of age or gender. General wisdom suggests that bullying can happen to anyone. In reality, no occupation or profession can be excluded from the spectre of bullies. In Australia, health and community services, education and public administration have been identified as industries where bullying commonly occurs (Victorian WorkCover Authority 2001).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the types of workplace bullying experienced in four Australian universities.

Background

There are 47 universities across the states and territories of Australia. In the late 1980s and early 90s the then federal Labor government actively encouraged universities to become subject to federal award legislation. Through the award system, performance management, including procedures for dealing with individual academic performance problems or misconduct was a major focus [Argall 2002). In 1993 these arrangements fundamentally changed. Universities were encouraged to move away from the award system to having their employment relations governed by enterprise agreements. In 2001, 83,800 academic and non-academic staff were employed in the university sector and twenty-six thousand of these employees were members of the major academic union, the National Tertiary Education Union [NTEU].

Today, Australian universities are on a treadmill, trying to keep one step ahead of steadily declining government funding, enhanced student expectations, and declining morale – all of which have cultivated a climate of uncertainty. The picture that emerges suggests that for some, the university workplace is a place of internal turmoil. Escalating workloads and mounting insecurity have fostered a culture of hostility. Anecdotal evidence suggests that at some universities, the bullying behaviour of supervisors, managers and colleagues is making scapegoats of vulnerable individuals – many of whom are reluctant to communicate their concerns. It is quite probable that bullying behaviour in the tertiary education sector is under-reported.

The prevalence of workplace bullying in Australia

Workplace bullying is a complex issue and a number of contextual factors have been identified - pressures caused by the twin forces of global competition and the rapid pace of change, economic hardship, downsizing, restructuring, a conflictual work environment, poor internal processes of conflict resolution, and limited worker participation in management decisions (Hillan 1997). A recent study by two Australian doctors (McAvoy & Murtagh 2003) blames a combination of economic rationalism, continuous downsizing, and tough managerial styles for an epidemic of 'toxic'Australian workplaces.

Although no reliable estimate exists of the number of Australians experiencing workplace bullying (Barker, Sheehan, McCarthy & Henderson 2001), some statistics are available. The 1999 Morgan and Banks Australian Job Index Survey reported that 10 per cent of employers believed that workplace bullying was increasing. And there is strong evidence to support this assertion. Farrell's (1999) study of Australian nurses revealed that 30 per cent were exposed to aggression on a daily basis. De Boehmler (2002) suggests

that between 25 and 50 per cent of Australian workers will experience bullying at some time in their career. Barker *et al*. (2001) put this figure at around 2.5 million workers - a cost to Australian business as high as $A3 billion a year. Michelson (2001) claims that 50 per cent of affected workers will quit their job, and that 75 per cent of bullied workers take sick leave and have reported depression – all of which depletes organisational morale and productivity. In this vein, McAvoy and Murtagh (2003) contend that workplace bullying is one of the factors behind the growing prevalence of depression and mental illness – estimated to account for 10 per cent of the workload of Australian general practitioners.

In one state alone, South Australia, the Office of the Employee Ombudsman receives more than 500 complaints each year concerning workplace-bullying issues. Over half the respondents to a 1997 South Australian Working Women's Centre survey on bullying reported that they had been bullied in the previous three months (NTEU 2002). After estimating that workplace bullying was costing it $A1.2M per year, the South Australian public health service became one of the first organisations in Australia to devise a comprehensive strategy to deal with bullying (Workplace OHS 2002). In another survey of 3000 Australian workers [representing health, education, finance, manufacturing, clerical and administration workers] undertaken in 2000 by the Australian Council of Trade Unions [ACTU], 54 per cent experienced intimidating behaviour in the workplace. Five per cent reported being assaulted at work, and 10 per cent experienced physically threatening behaviour. In eighty-five per cent of cases, employers, managers, and supervisors were the culprits (ACTU 2001). The NTEU asserts that the prevalence of workplace bullying in the general workforce means that bullying affects a significant proportion of employees in the tertiary education sector [NTEU 2002].

Workplace bullying and legislation

It appears that legislation specific to workplace bullying is not effectively addressed worldwide. Field, Becker, Mackenzie, and Crossan (2002) for example, reveal that Sweden and Norway are the only European countries to deal with the issue legislatively. In Australia, there is little evidence to suggest that the current legislation recognises adequately workplace bullying (Kieseker & Marchant 1999). McCarthy, Rylance, Bennett & Zimmermann (2001) concur and note that guidelines, policies, legislation and therapeutic interventions have been implemented to differing degrees at an individual, organistional and state level. As an example, Kieseker & Marchant's (1999) research unveiled some incidences where bullying was addressed under Queensland workplace health and safety legislation. Possibly as a result of union pressure, the New South Wales Labor Council recently announced that it was developing a policy that would set out steps for victims, perpetrators and employers to take when bullying occurs [the extant New South Wales consolidated Occupational Health and Safety Regulation 2001 requires employers to take reasonable care to identify hazards arising from the potential for workplace violence]. The states of Victoria and Queensland are on the cusp of implementing a bullying code of practice.

Definitional Issue: What is workplace bullying?

Bullying is a broad, typically imprecisely used term, encompassing a wide variety of phenomena. Kiesker & Marchant's (1999) research concluded that that no agreed definition existed. What is apparent is that all definitions contain the element of *power* in one form or another. From the literature several explanations can be distilled. Some of them propose to explain 'internal' violence And according to Mayhew and Chappell (2001) different forms of 'internal' violence are known by different names. In the European Union and Australia for example, the term bullying is a common term for lower-level violence. In the United States, the terms harassment, mistreatment, or emotional abuse are preferred. Horizontal violence and mobbing are other terms used to describe hostile and aggressive behaviour by individual or group members toward another member (Hastie 2001; Leymann 2001). Such behaviour may be systematic and frequent.

Other explanations are based on the premise that there are general concepts and generic principles. Rayner and Hoel (1997) for example, identify five categories of bullying behaviour: threats to professional status; threats to personal standing; isolation; overwork; and destabilisation. Workplace bullying need not involve physical ill treatment, such as punching, kicking and other ways of inflicting physical pain. Indeed, research that suggests that only around 10 per cent of bullying involves some form of physical assault. Hoel, Sparks, & Cooper (2002) note that contemporary European, US and Australian research indicates that emotional and

psychological abuse rather than physical violence represents the greatest threat to workers. Most cases of bullying involve such treatment as verbal abuse, "nit-picking", threats, sarcasm, ostracism, sabotage of a person's work and so on. (The South Australian Office of the Employee Ombudsman). Bullying can be obvious and overt, for example when a supervisor harasses and yells at a subordinate. It can be subtle, such as setting unrealistic expectations or denying the worker the necessary resources to complete a task (Olson 2001). Bullying is also a situation in which one worker emotionally harasses a fellow worker.

TYPES OF WORKPLACE BULLYING

Considerable research into workplace bullying emanates from the U.K. Of interest is the work of Tim Field from the U.K. National Workplace Bullying Advice Group. Field (2002) provides a repertoire of types of workplace bullying:

- Pressure Bullying [occurs because of the stress of the moment];
- Organisational Bullying [occurs when an organisational struggles to adapt to changing markets, reduced income, cuts in budgets, imposed expectations & other external pressures];
- Corporate Bullying [employer abuse especially when jobs are scarce and the law is weak on bullying];
- Institutional Bullying [arises when workplace bullying becomes entrenched];
- Client Bullying [where employees are bullied by those they service e.g. nurses, social workers, teachers];
- Serial Bullying [unwitting bullying which people start exhibiting when there's a serial bully in the department];
- Pair Bullying [serial bullying with a colleague];
- Gang Bullying [serial bully with colleagues];
- Vicarious Bullying [where two parties are encouraged to engage in adversarial interaction or conflict];
- Regulation Bullying [where serial bully forces their target to comply with rules & regulations];
- Residual bullying [bullying that continues to manifest itself after the serial bully has left the workplace]; and
- Cyber Bullying [misuse of email systems for sending aggressive flame mails]

Bullying using organisation procedures

The difference between schoolyard bullies and boardroom bullies is the scope for the latter to demean other people using organisational procedures and positional power [McMahon 2001]. Using descriptions from a school environment, McMahon (2001) categorises various kinds of procedural bullying:

- Gatekeeper bullying [establishing barriers to be overcome and gauntlets to be run by colleagues in their working lives];
- Sandpit bullying [restructuring successful teams in order to split them up, assigning experts to generalist tasks; sending achievers on wild goose chases and taking over projects when success is assured];
- Toilet bullying [falsification and vilification in performance reports, punitive transfers and secondments, personal threats, ridicule and slander during interviews or in 'private', hardship rostering patterns, extortion of favours, and coercion into cooperative bulling of others into complicity with breaches of proper procedures]; and
- King bullying [the 'expelling' of workers from locations, careers, groups, special projects, committees and from organisations].

In sum, workplace bullying is behaviour on a continuum ranging from spreading malicious rumours, over-critical work evaluation, to direct verbal threats and physical violence. Employees can be subjected to tactics as diverse as blocking, spoiling, hurting, and expulsion.

Bullying Behaviour: An Australian union definition

Australian unions have been at the forefront in tackling workplace bullying. The Australian Services Union [ASU] The Australian Nursing Federation [ANF] The Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union,

the Community and Public Sector Union [CPSU] and the NTEU are examples of unions that have taken steps to address this issue. The ANF's approach to bullying and violence in the workplace is two-fold: a 'zero-tolerance' occupational violence and aggression policy, and a separate workplace bullying and harassment policy.

The NTEU identify a range of behaviours that may constitute bullying: verbal abuse; excluding or isolating employees; psychological harassment; assigning meaningless tasks unrelated to the job; giving employees impossible assignments; deliberately changing work rosters to inconvenience particular employees; and deliberately withholding information that is vital for effective work performance (NTEU 2002).

THE UNIVERSITY BULLY

A considerable amount of research attention has been directed toward workplace bullying. Rather surprisingly, little empirical research has been cast toward the university bully. Some evidence is of a tangential nature. For example, Leymann's (cited in Hoel *et al.* 2002, p20) Swedish research found that people working in schools, universities and other educational settings were at most risk of being bullied. Moret (1999) refers to practices of mobbing and bullying at the University of California. She asserts that a pervasive, systemic organisational pattern of mobbing/bullying existed within the entire university system. Kiesker & Marchant (2000) provide some Australian evidence and cite Garner (1995) and O'Brien (1997) in support. Garner's (1995) ostensibly fictional work was controversial from a feminist perspective. Her book [The First Stone – Some Questions about Sex and Power] described the experiences of a Melbourne University residential college master accused of sexually harassing two young female students. Garner's book challenged the two female students. However in this situation, the college master and the college itself were in a position of 'legitimate' power – the college was able to exert influence over the students' residence at the college and for one of the women involved, her enrolment status at Melbourne University. O'Brien (1997) in an editorial comment 'Sex, Booze, and Australian universities' identifies acts of violence, intimidation and harassment at Australian university colleges directed toward female students. She concluded that it took the murder of a young female student by a fellow male student at the University of Adelaide for the university to 'sit up and take notice'.

Of the 47 universities in Australia, 41 have a written, formal policy on bullying. Despite the NTEU's extensive policy on workplace bullying, limited progress has been made with getting university managers to commit to bullying clauses in Enterprise Agreements. The Osiris database shows that 90 enterprise bargaining agreements contain an anti-bullying provision, yet only 11 of these apply to university employees.[1] Interestingly, the enterprise agreement between the University of Queensland Union and the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers' Union forged in 2000 is acknowledged as a best-practice model for the incorporation of anti-bullying measures in an enterprise bargaining agreement (McCarthy *et al* 2001:xvi). Three case studies [Deakin University, The University of Sydney, and Victoria University], and examples from the University of Western Australia suggest that behaviours of intimidation and harassment may be commonplace in the Australian tertiary education sector.

Deakin University: an award winning university with 2,105 staff and five campuses throughout Victoria, Australia. In 2001, the university branch of the NTEU surveyed academic and general staff to gauge the extent of workplace bullying. Both academic and general staff experienced bullying with many respondents reporting multiple examples. These included intimidation [50 per cent of respondents], being fearful of speaking out [45 per cent], and being pressured to accept excessive workloads [45 per cent]. Forty-five per cent of respondents believed that the university's long-hours culture led to them being pressured to stay

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1 Central Queensland University Enterprise Agreement [Academic Staff] 2000; Central Queensland Enterprise Agreement [General Staff] 2000; Macquarie University Enterprise Agreement 2000-2003; Griffith University General Staff Certified Agreement 2000-2003; Griffith University Academic Staff Certified Agreement 2000-2003; James Cook University Enterprise Bargaining Agreement 2000; University of Western Sydney Academic Staff Enterprise Agreement; University of Western Sydney General Staff Enterprise Agreement 2001-2003; Victoria University of Technology Enterprise Bargaining Agreement 2000-2003; University of Queensland Enterprise Agreement Academic Staff 2000; Queensland University of Technology Enterprise Bargaining Agreement, General Staff 2000-2003.

behind to finish work – either paid or unpaid. Thirty per cent felt bullied or pressured to lower academic standards. Bullying behaviour was also experienced in the annual compulsory performance planning review. Respondents revealed that what was purported to be an interactive two-way communicative process could be a punitive imposition of the reviewer's values on to the reviewees. Asked who were the main perpetrators, respondents listed superiors such as the Dean/Manager and the Heads of Schools/Divisions. Fellow workers were the second most common form of bully identified.

The University of Sydney: Australia's first university was established in 1850. In 2001 it employed 5,804 academic and general staff. Sixty per cent of respondents to a 2001 CPSU survey reported workplace bullying. The main perpetrator of bullying tended to be a manager or supervisor [62 per cent]. Thirty-one per cent of bullying behaviour came from academics, and 25 per cent from students. The most common form of intimidating behaviour was verbal abuse in the form of shouting, ordering or belittling [72 per cent]. Twenty-three per cent of respondents experienced both verbal and physical abuse. When bullying had been reported, 65 per cent of respondents felt that the action taken by management was largely unsatisfactory.

Victoria University, Melbourne: 50,000 students, 3000 academic & general staff, 11 campuses. Empirical research undertaken by the university's Equity and Social Justice Branch revealed that academic and general staff experienced workplace bullying. Most examples involved low-level bullying: in particular, verbal abuse and belittling behaviour in public and private (Cooke 2001).

Anecdotal examples of bullying included research funds or projects being manipulated, timetables being set to disadvantage members of staff, departments being restructured with no opportunity for all, or some to participate, legitimate leave requests being refused, individuals being lied to and about, staff being denied meaningful work then being accused of not being a team player. Cooke (2001) also found that there was a generally–held view that bullies knew how to 'work the system' and that they were adept at gaining the support of the HR department. Understandably, bullied victims at this university were reluctant to pursue the issue fearing ridicule or isolation by colleagues.

A similar story emerges from the University of Western Australia. The university's 2000 Staff Exit Report revealed that a number of former staff had experienced bullying behaviour in their immediate working environment. Reports of standover tactics, unreasonable put-downs, ridicule of staff in the presence of students and the put-down of contrary views were provided. Temporary contracts were also employed as an implied threat. One former staff member put it this way: 'people were expected to toe the line'. And from another ex-colleague: … 'the dollar speaks… the ends justify the means'. The report indicates that most bullying targets were fearful of their future careers and had chosen not to pursue an official grievance.

In unrelated research, consultants from the University of Western Australia, (Stuart & Finlay 2002) examined the hidden costs of bullying in Western Australian workplaces - specifically to understand the impact of bullying behaviour on people and their organisations (both targets and witnesses). They undertook a voluntary online survey of 267 respondents primarily from higher education and the public sector in Western Australia. Fifty-five percent of respondents were from the higher education sector. Stuart & Finlay (2002) found that the nature of bullying experienced by respondents was largely covert. Threats to personal status and destabilisation scored most highly. The workplace culture was one of 'blame the victim', one where people were seen as 'too sensitive', or lacking a 'sense of humour'. The individual impacts of bullying among respondents were high stress levels, lost work time, and high levels of cynicism and negativity. The most effective action taken by targets according to Stuart and Finlay (2002) was to leave the job, as formal mechanisms of redress were seen as less helpful, Moreover, there was a perception that management were reluctant to act.

It is possible to use McMahon's (2001) typology of procedural bullying [Gatekeeper; Sandpit; Toilet; and King] to identify some commonalities in Australian university bullying revealed in the above case studies.

Gatekeeper bullying: Among the behaviours McMahon (2001:55) identifies with this bully are: denying subordinates (without reasonable grounds) access to applications, priority over other staff, funds, meetings or briefings necessary to the subordinate's work and training, and the flexibility necessary for family life. The characteristics of reported bullying at Victoria University especially concerning the refusal of leave, the

manipulation of research funds, timetabling issues, and departmental restructuring are attributes fitting the 'gatekeeper' nomenclature.

Sandpit bullying: This type of bully according to McMahon (2001:56) undermines the progress, achievements, growth and success of target individuals. The situation where the spoiling outcome is greatest is where the pre-existing condition is excellence or potential excellence. Deakin University is an award winning university. Deakin personnel identified bullying behaviour such as the lowering of academic standards, punitive performance planning review tactics, and increased workloads - all illustrative of this type of bully.

Toilet bullying: The opportunities used by this kind of bully include the one-to-one interview, falsification and vilification in performance reports, ridicule and slander during interviews, hardship rostering patterns, and extortion of favours. McMahon (2001:56) argues that the greatest operation of toilet tactics is within the 'privacy' of the discretionary power afforded to the superior officer by the organisation in decision-making affecting the subordinate. The respondents from Deakin university, Victoria University, and the former staff at the University of Western Australia have experienced this kind of bully.

King bullying: This bully 'expels' workers from locations, careers, groups, committees, projects, and collaborations and from organisations. McMahon (2001:57) states that the reason for the 'expulsion' might appear arbitrary, but can typically be for a slight affront. Victoria University respondents appear to encounter the king bullying behaviour vis-à-vis research funding and departmental restructuring.

Obvious and overt bullying in the shape of verbal abuse is a tactic identified by both the University of Sydney and Victoria University respondents. The University of Sydney staff were the only respondents to report actual physical abuse. This is in line with most schools of thought that emotional and psychological abuse rather than physical violence represents the greatest threat to workers. Among the types of bullying identified by Field (2002) were organisational, pressure, and regulation bullying. The persistent bullying revealed by the respondents in this paper suggests that their workplaces are infected with these forms of systemic bullying.

In sum, the experiences of these Australian universities parallel, to some extent, the Finnish findings of Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Hjelt-Back (1994) cited in Neuman (1998). They estimated that 30 per cent of males and 55 per cent of females surveyed in a university environment had been subjected to some form of harassment during a 12-month period. Thirty two per cent of respondents reported [amongst other episodes] undue criticism, being shouted at loudly, being exposed to insulting comments, and receiving unfairly damaging performance evaluations.

DISCUSSION

The examples used in this paper illustrate the bullying encountered in four Australian university communities – this represents about 10 per cent of the university sector. Obviously, it is not wise to generalise these revelations across the tertiary sector without further empirical research. Interestingly however, the university experience described here mirror Australian research findings of the broader community. McCarthy and Barker's (2000) Australian workplace bullying risk audit found that the most common bullying behaviours were: inappropriate comments about a person's appearance; yelling, screaming abusive language, and insults; repeated belittling opinions or constant criticisms; overwork, pressure to meet impossible deadlines; and repeated failure to give credit where due. The forms of workplace bullying reported by the South Australian Employee Ombudsman in 2001 included overloading the victim with work or requiring work to be done without there being sufficient time to do it [victims were subsequently criticised for taking too long over a job or for not doing it properly], denying opportunities for training, promotion, or interesting work. Yet another tactic was humiliating the victim through sarcasm, criticism and insults, often in front of colleagues.

Bullying and workplace harassment pose an important legal issue for employers. The legal arrangements under which employers may generally be held liable are the criminal, common and civil law, workers'

compensation and health and safety legislation. Willmott (2001) elaborates on six legal avenues aggrieved employees can pursue: Anti-Discrimination Legislation [if harassment is based on one of the grounds of discrimination such as sex, homosexuality, and age]; Common Law [employees subject to harassment may bring a claim for breach of contract or negligence under common law]; Constructive Dismissal [if an employee is harassed or bullied at work and leaves their employment they can bring a claim for constructive dismissal]; Occupational Health and Safety [a workplace culture that allows harassment and bullying to occur may be an occupational health & safety hazard]; and Workers' compensation [universities may be liable for injuries to workers as a result of bullying and harassment in the workplace]. Moreover, McCarthy *et al*. (2001:xvi) report that Australian judiciary and tribunals routinely accept evidence of less overt types of bullying in actions for unfair dismissal, psychological injury, and breaches of implied terms of employment contracts.

The workplace represents much more than a place where people earn their 'bread and butter'. It is a place where they establish and nurture important relationships and it should be a place that respects their self-esteem and worth (Kennedy 2001). Workers' well-being has major consequences for themselves, their colleagues, their union and for management as well – psychologically and financially. Workplace bullying is insidious behaviour that can permeate the whole organisation and wreak havoc and destruction (Douglas 2001). That bullying in the workplace has a deleterious effect on productivity is evidenced by the fact that in the state of Victoria, in the 2000/01 financial year, nearly 1100 WorkCover claims arose out of either harassment at work or exposure to workplace violence (VTHC 2002). The Victorian government estimate that workplace bullying costs Victorian businesses more than $A57M a year in lost productivity and absteeism.

CONCLUSION

Today's bully is under scrutiny from all sides. Industry associations throughout Australia are supporting the implementation of anti-bullying policies – in a realisation that bullying undermines productivity and workers' health. State governments are implementing campaigns aimed at encouraging victims to report abuse rather than suffer in silence. Unions in each Australian state and territory are tackling the workplace bully across all industry sectors. Concerning the tertiary education sector, the NTEU has a comprehensive national policy against workplace bullying, but is meeting with limited success [as shown in university enterprise bargaining agreements] possibly due to the management prerogative of the university hierarchy. Moreover, bullying behaviour is probably under-reported by victims because they fear further retaliation from the bully and colleagues as experienced by the victims at Victoria University. In sum, collegiality is protecting the university bully. On the plus side, bullying affords unions such as the NTEU a powerful organising tool. The traditional response to powerlessness has been for workers to band together in unions. If a union can offer meaningful protection from humiliating workplace practices, then it proves its worth to members and potential members. And as Olson (2001) points out, what works with dealing with a bully is group cohesion, actions that unions should naturally fill. Perhaps changing the incentive/power structure in which bullies operate may induce them to alter their behaviour. Bullies should not be 'rewarded' – universities should adopt and legally inforce a zero tolerance policy toward bullying. No one can ignore the problem of bullying. Long live whistleblowers.

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