Understanding young people's experiences and perceptions of relational bullying: A qualitative study

Bullying is commonly defined as intentional harmful behaviours carried out repeatedly over time against an individual with less physical or psychological strength (Olweus, 1995). This definition has also been used in United Kingdom (UK) national policy (Department for Education [DfE], 2017) and among anti-bullying organisations such as the Anti-Bullying Alliance.

Research (Biebl et al, 2011; Hertz et al, 2015; Moore et al, 2017) has demonstrated that bullying is detrimental to young people; Vanderbilt and Augustyn (2010) suggest that negative effects include poorer outcomes in terms of health as well as pyscho-social adjustments; these are not just limited to the victim but can also affect perpetrators (Gini and Pozzoli, 2009; Winsper et al, 2012; Copeland et al, 2015) and bystanders (Rivers, et al, 2009; Werth al, 2015). The detrimental and potentially long-lasting effect of bullying has resulted in widespread concern and focus on its prevention (Minton and O'Moore, 2004; Smith, 2011).

Relational bullying describes behaviours that cause harm through the manipulation and damage of friendships, peer relationships and social status (Crick and Grotpeter, 1995). Physical, verbal, and relational bullying are often described as 'traditional' bullying behaviours when compared to other types, such as cyberbullying (Waasdorp and Bradshaw, 2015; Przybylski and Bowes, 2017). Relational bullying includes the spreading of rumours and lies to damage a person's social standing, excluding an individual from socialising with peers and encouraging others to do the same. A UK study with university students established that experiencing relational bullying in childhood was associated with social anxiety in later life (Boulton, 2013). Examination of the literature identifies discrepancies in

Abstract

Background: Bullying among young people has been acknowledged as a public health concern. Relational bullying is the systematic manipulation and damage of peer relationships; the way in which it is perceived can influence detection and interventions, in view of this, relational bullying warranted further exploration from the perspectives of young people.

Aim: To understand the experience and perception of relational bullying among young people.

Methods: A qualitative approach underpinned the undertaking of 11 face-to-face interviews with young people aged 12–18 years. Data was thematically analysed.

Findings: Seven themes emerged: The complexity of defining bullying, The role of friends; Negative impacts, Social media, Normalisation, Personal resources to aid navigation, External resources to aid navigation.

Conclusions: Factors that help and hinder the navigation of relational bullying were identified, the family playing a crucial role in mitigating the negative effects. The findings have the potential to be relevant to other forms of bullying.

Key words

Young people, bullying, relational bullying, qualitative research, interviews

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defining and understanding this form of bullying among academics (Björkqvist, 2001; Coyne et al, 2006) and the public (Smith et al, 2002; Smorti et al, 2003). In addition, it can be difficult to intervene in cases (Ofsted, 2003), with research suggesting that other forms of behaviours (particularly physical ones) take precedence when school staff respond to bullying incidents (Kahn et al, 2012; Boulton et al, 2014).

Relational bullying has received less attention than other forms of bullying; students, parents and school staff members are less likely to define relational bullying behaviours as a form of bullying (Smith et al, 2002; Smorti et al, 2003). Furthermore, it is ranked as the least severe form and evokes less empathy (Kahn et al, 2012; Boulton et al, 2014) even though it can have a substantive and long-term negative impact on the young person. Ofsted (2003) acknowledges that it is more difficult to define and detect relational bullying behaviours compared with other types.

It is important to understand the young person's perspective about why behaviours are (or are not) conceptualised as bullying as this is likely to influence the way in which they respond. Canty et al (2016) advocate the use of qualitative research which does not pose a definition of bullying, thus permitting young people to provide voluntary insights into bullying which extend beyond the scope of adult-led perceptions. This study aimed to address that need.

Aims

The aim of the research was to understand the experience and perception of relational bullying among young people. The two key objectives were to:
- Identify factors which young people perceive may help them navigate relational bullying
- Understand how young people perceive relational bullying.

Methods

The research adopted a qualitative approach as this aims to gain rich insights into real-life problems (Moser and Korstjens, 2017). Data collection focusses on the experiences and perceptions of participants (Tenny et al, 2022), searching for their understanding of the phenomenon under investigation; as a result, questions are normally open-ended (Cleland, 2017).

Table 1. Descriptive statements to facilitate discussions on relational bullying

- Other students left them out of things on purpose, excluded them from their group of friends, or completely ignored them.
- Other students told lies or spread rumours about them and tried to make others dislike them.
- Other students spread embarrassing or personal information about them.

Two reference groups (one with six girls, aged 11–13 years and another with a boy and girl, aged 15–16 years) were held to enable young people to voice their views about the research topic and methodology. The groups revealed variation in how young people understood and defined relational bullying specifically; as a result, descriptive statements were formulated and used during data collection. The consultation also suggested that individual interviews would be the preferred method of data collection.

Sampling and recruitment

The nature of qualitative research dictates that the sampling processes are normally purposeful (Devers and Frankel, 2000) and that potential participants are 'selected because of their personal experience or knowledge of the topic under study' (Cleary et al, 2014: 473). young people aged 11–18 years were recruited based on the experience and insight of bullying behaviours, they did not need to have experienced bullying themselves. Participants were recruited via two secondary schools, one from the East Midlands (School 1) and one from the East of England (School 2). To facilitate recruitment, introductory information was shared with young people inviting them to take part in the study; those who were interested in being involved were asked to talk to their parent/guardian and were given an envelope containing a student information letter, parent/guardian information letter and parent/guardian consent form. Interview dates were scheduled with the young people; before the interview commenced, young people returned the signed parent/guardian consent form and, prior to starting the interview, the young person completed their own consent form. Eleven participants were recruited.

Data collection

A semi-structured interview approach that comprised of a series of prompt questions, was adopted. This allowed the exploration of unexpected topics and flexibility in how and when questions were asked (McIntosh and Morse, 2015).

The interviews were facilitated with the use of descriptive statements (*Table 1*) that enabled the consistent illustration of relational bullying.

Interviews were held in a private room, nine on School 1 premises and two in a university setting where the students were undertaking work experience. Data collection was conducted between January-March 2018; all interviews were audio recorded, lasted between 25 and 40 minutes and were transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis involves 'identifying, analysing, organising, describing, and reporting themes within a data set' (Nowell et al, 2017: 2); the six phases offered by Braun and Clarke (2006) were used to guide analysis.

Table 2. The data analysis process

Stage	Action taken
Becoming familiar with the data	The audio recordings were listened to, and the transcripts re-read several times. Transcripts were annotated with initial observations.
Generating initial codes	This involved identifying a 'label for a feature of the data that is potentially relevant to the research question' (Braun and Clarke, 2012: 61). This resulted in 165 codes.
Second level of coding	This was an additional step introduced to reduce the number of initial codes, reducing the number to 49 codes.
Searching for themes	The codes were scrutinised to detect similarities and overarching topics, nine themes emerged.
Reviewing themes	The themes were reviewed to ensure they were a true reflection of the data. Following the review, seven themes were retained (*Table 3*).
Defining and naming themes	Themes were defined and named.
Producing the report	Write-up of the themes was an extension of the analysis rather than a distinct phase post-analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012).

However, a secondary coding step was introduced, resulting in seven stages (*Table 2*).

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Hertfordshire Health, Science, Engineering and Technology Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority, protocol number: aHSK/PGR/UH/02866(3). All procedures were performed in compliance with relevant laws and institutional guidelines; in addition, a Disclosure and Barring Service check was also conducted in line with university ethics procedures for working with children and young people.

Findings

Table 3 identifies the themes that emerged and *Table 4* provides details about the 11 participants.

The complexity of defining bullying

The young people offered their thoughts about bullying; they emphasised that it was a harmful behaviour, done on purpose with the intent of causing emotional distress to the victim:

'It's when you're doing something on purpose to upset another person, or to…hurt their feelings.' (Jess)

However, when asked to clarify when and why behaviours may (or may not) be perceived as bullying, many found this challenging to describe. In addition, young people initially commented that bullying was a repetitive behaviour, but a different stance was adopted as the interview progressed, suggesting that bullying is harmful irrespective of frequency and that it can be a single incident:

'I guess it [a single incident] can still be classed as bullying if it's like really bad.' (Kirsty)

The only exception to this were the two youngest participants, Molly and Dylan, who were unwavering in defining bullying as a repetitive behaviour.

The role of personal experience was particularly relevant in identifying whether behaviours were bullying. Molly stated, 'I kind of know' and described her own experience of being bullied. Others recognised that their definition was influenced by their own observations and the accounts of others:

'My definition of bullying…comes from what I see and what I can tell hurts people and…what would hurt me.' (Harriet)

Not only did young people indicate how complex it can be to define bullying, but they acknowledged how others around them may hold different views:

'Different people think bullying is different things.' (Heidi, 15 years old)

Table 3. The themes that emerged following data analysis

- The complexity of defining bullying
- The role of friends
- Negative impacts
- Social media
- Normalisation
- Personal resources to aid navigation
- External resources to aid navigation

Table 4. Participant demographics					
Pseudonym	**School**	**Gender**	**Age**	**Year group**	**Ethnicity**
Jess	1	Female	14 years	9	White British
Bethany	1	Female	13 years	9	White British
Heidi	1	Female	15 years	11	White British
Harriet	1	Female	15 years	11	White British
Claire	1	Female	16 years	11	White British
Molly	1	Female	12 years	7	White British
Joe	1	Male	17 years	12	White British
Dylan	1	Male	12 years	7	White British
Kelly	1	Female	18 years	13	White British
Tiffany	2	Female	15 years	10	White British
Kirsty	2	Female	14 years	10	White British

The role of friends in relational bullying

After discussing bullying generically, relational bullying was introduced using descriptive statements (*Table 1*). young people acknowledged that spreading of rumours, embarrassing information and social exclusion may stem from within their own friendship group:

'It could be like someone's like close friend where they've told them things about them like that you'd only tell someone that was close and then they've like betrayed their trust.' (Claire)

Kirsty, Jess and Tiffany all suggested that social exclusion and rumour spreading may occur after a 'falling out' between friends:

'And we found out that it was one of the girls just making it up because they had fallen out and she lost all her friends for no reason.' (Tiffany)

Some young people were more specific about relational bullying behaviours among friends, referring to the idea of 'revenge':

'Yeah, because they could be like trying to get like revenge on you for something.' (Claire)

Harriet felt relational bullying was more common among a social group who she perceived as having 'a lot more experience with boys' and Joe felt these behaviours were often due to jealousy over 'who they are going out with'; Bethany thought that an individual may be excluded from a friendship group for receiving attention from a boy. Furthermore, the types of rumours were often sexual in nature, with Kelly labelling their content as 'inappropriate'. Tiffany explained how sexual rumours can be used to damage friendships and isolate individuals, by creating competition and exploiting emotions around romantic relationships.

Negative impacts

Young people were consistent in describing the emotionally hurtful nature of relational bullying: 'It made me feel really upset.' (Jess) and 'it's … horrible.' (Harriet). Longer-term detrimental implications were acknowledged:

'It might even lead to someone having depression…or like self-harming.' (Kirsty)

Other young people agreed that relational bullying, especially the spreading of rumours can be damaging to how young people feel about themselves, Joe explained that rumours:

'Strip away everything … like the personality of the person.' (Joe)

Many young people referred to feelings of isolation, vulnerability, and loneliness which accompanied these types of behaviour; Kelly suggested that it may be the involvement of friends in relational bullying which made it particularly upsetting:

'Especially when it's your friends or people you thought were your friends, I think that hurts a lot more because it's kind of like they've betrayed you and it's like you wouldn't expect them to do that. It's like they've kind of like turned on you and now they are one of the bullies.' (Kelly)

Many young people mentioned that those who experienced relational bullying were not only actively isolated by others, but they chose to avoid social situations. Harriet referred to wanting to 'curl into a ball'. School was identified as an environment that young people may want to avoid, thus affecting attendance and educational outcomes.

Social media

The narratives of the young people illustrated that relational bullying behaviours were persistent and far-reaching. They described how quickly and easily they spread across classes and year groups: 'Spreading all… round school' (Molly). The use of mobile phones and social media was frequently mentioned as contributing to this:

'When it happened to me it went all over social media.' (Jess).

The young people were very knowledgeable about social media platforms, such as Snapchat and Instagram, and explained how they could be used to rapidly share information; the use of the Apps meaning that 'everyone can see it' (Tiffany). Mobile phones further increased the speed at which information was shared:

● Young people described situations when social media could be used to aid exclusion, Bethany mentioned that friends can 'block your number so you can't contact them'. Some young people felt that the use of 'phones and social media could have especially harmful consequences as it meant that the perpetrator could remain anonymous, making it 'particularly distressing' (Kelly).
● Young people described how schools had prohibited the use of phones with Joe and Kirsty speaking positively about this rule as it minimised rumour spreading and prevented the taking of photographs during the school day.

Normalisation

This theme illustrates how young people themselves, and the wider school environment, can normalise relational bullying. These behaviours were viewed as a common occurrence among young people, with four participants referring to their own experience of being subjected to them and a further five saying that they had witnessed it. The language young people adopted when describing the regularity of relational bullying was casual; the young people had seen relational bullying behaviours 'sooo many times' (Harriet) and indicated that they had observed it while at school; the language they used reflected how these behaviours were deemed frequent, and thus normalised, within their lives.

Young people people described a focus on physical bullying behaviours, which inadvertently minimised relational bullying behaviours. Tiffany explained how she approached her headteacher with concerns about bullying and she reported feeling that the school would intervene only if the bullying took on a physical form.

Personal resources to aid navigation

The young people felt that relational bullying was experienced and navigated in different ways, for example, some appeared to be able to 'brush it off' (Jess). The young people thought that having a positive sense of self was beneficial to navigation:

'I feel like…if you're more of a mature person and more like comfortable and confident with who you are then what other people say won't bother you as much.' (Harriet)

The young people identified several strategies that would enable them to successfully navigate bullying, demonstrating that their own resourcefulness was a useful coping tool. They spoke about how they would avoid putting themselves in situations which would upset them or expose them to the bullying:

'At lunch you try and find something you've got to do' in order to avoid *'sitting by themselves' (Tiffany)*

They also spoke about spending time in different spaces such as the 'library' (Claire) or a specific classroom (Jess); they also talked about reducing their time in the virtual world, suggesting that avoiding or limiting mobile phone use was a positive approach.

Another strategy young people used was engaging in diversional activities, such as listening to music and taking part in art and sport.

External resources to aid navigation

All the young people said their family was an external source of support:

'It is nice to eventually tell your parents and they can help you deal with that as well, because then you don't have to keep it all inside, you can let all out.' (Kirsty)

However, some accounts suggested that victims may be initially reluctant, or find it difficult, to speak to their parents; other young people acknowledged the practical role parents could play such as contacting teachers to report the bullying and working with the school. It was felt that if parents engaged with the school on bullying matters, it added more weight to the student's statement and may strengthen the school's response to the bullying incident. Siblings and cousins were also referred to as they could help to stop the spread of rumours.

All the young people mentioned the school environment, several being critical about the way in which it responded to bullying. Despite this, the young people also acknowledged that staff were able to help those being bullied, this included teachers and the welfare team. The young people frequently referred to a particular teacher as the 'go to' person as a closer relationship had been built with him/her.

Young people also consistently described how friends could be a positive resource with phrases such as 'got my back' (Jess and Kirsty) being used. Friends offered support and took an active role to 'stop the bullying'

(Dylan). To feel supported, the view was that one friend could be enough. While there was wide recognition that friendships could be invaluable, some young people showed awareness of the potential unpredictability of friends:

'She was pretending to be my friend like one day and then another day she was like really horrible'. (Kirsty)

Discussion

This study revealed young people's experiences and perceptions of relational bullying, these being underpinned by their broader conceptualisation of more general bullying behaviours. The young people consistently described the intentional and harmful nature of bullying, corroborating existing work (Cuadrado-Gordillo, 2012). Their interpretation of the repetition criteria for bullying was influenced by other factors including how harmful the experience was perceived to be. Recent definitions proposed by several organisations are further testimony to the complexity of defining bullying as a repetitive act; the Northern Ireland Anti-bullying Forum state that bullying is usually repeated, while the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention claim that it is highly likely to be repeated (Gladden et al, 2014). The Scottish anti-bullying organisation, Respectme, has adopted a critical stance, stressing the subjective notion of measuring repetition and insisting that a single incident can be detrimental to a young person's wellbeing.

In this research, most young people recognised relational bullying behaviours as a form of bullying; however previous work has found that young people are less likely to consider it (Boulton et al, 2002; Naylor et al, 2006; Vaillancourt et al, 2008; Maunder et al, 2010). The variation in findings may be attributed in part to the semi-structured qualitative interviews which allowed young people to reflect on what bullying meant to them. Comparatively, UK studies with diverging findings often employed a survey methodology (Boulton et al, 2002; Maunder et al, 2010). Our findings may also reflect the predominantly female interviewees, as research has found that girls are more likely than boys to refer to relational behaviours when defining bullying (Naylor et al, 2006; Hellström et al, 2015). In this study, young people's understanding of what is (and what is not) bullying drew on sources of information from within their social context including, for example, knowledge of friendship groups and previous conflict among individuals.

It is noteworthy that young people themselves acknowledged that their definition differed to that of the adults around them. They recognised (and were critical of) inconsistencies between their perception and those held within the wider school environment, often mentioning that school staff seemed to focus more on physical bullying.

Bullying behaviours are often cited as occurring in spaces not inhabited by adults, for example the school toilets, canteen or on social media (Jamal et al, 2015). However, this research emphasised the more abstract social context with young people's understanding of bullying often being dependent on situational factors. Whether physically present or not, adults are outsiders in young people's social worlds and are unlikely to have a full understanding of the group dynamics of young people.

A shared understanding and definition of bullying is important to ensure that incidents are responded to consistently. If young people and school staff have diverging perceptions of it, it is likely that policies and interventions will not align with young people's own experiences of bullying. Canty et al (2016) was critical of researchers who inferred young people need to be primed and taught what bullying is.

Over the last decade bullying has been studied from a public health perspective (Anthony et al, 2010). Longitudinal research has demonstrated that bullying can have long-term implications for physical health, emotional wellbeing and mental health, and social indicators (Moore et al, 2017; 2015). Relational bullying behaviours have been associated with negative outcomes, including anxiety (Boulton, 2013) and somatic symptoms such as headaches and decreased appetite (Nixon et al, 2011). The young people in this study vouched for the negative experience of relational bullying, with some describing their own emotional response to being victimised in this way.

As relational bullying often occurs among friendship groups, young people can be victimised in very personal ways; for example, the perpetrator can take advantage of information disclosed while the individuals were friends (Owens et al, 2000). Furthermore, as relational bullying behaviours are often subtle and hidden from observers, the victimisation may continue for longer without intervention, which could prolong and heighten the victim's distress (Thomas et al, 2016). Despite relational bullying being associated with negative outcomes, the language young people adopted normalised and minimised this form of bullying. International research with teaching staff from the UK (Maunder et al, 2010; Boulton et al, 2014), USA (Bauman and Del Rio, 2006; Kahn et al, 2012) and Australia (Byers et al, 2011) has established wider normative assumptions of relational bullying. Relational bullying has been perceived as less serious, less harmful and requiring less intervention than other forms. It could be argued that the normative language adopted by young people reflects the broader context in which they are situated. The way in which a behaviour is constructed is likely to influence an individual's responses to it and viewing this form of bullying as normative or trivial may be detrimental for those young people trying to navigate this behaviour.

The use of social media and mobile phones was described by young people as facilitating relational

bullying, including the spreading of rumours, and fostering feelings of social exclusion. Existing work has highlighted commonalities between relational bullying and cyberbullying. Like relational bullying, cyberbullying behaviours are often indirect in nature (Slonje et al, 2013) and are thought to occur among friends (Waasdorp and Bradshaw, 2015); a large-scale study of over 28 000 young people established an overlap between cyberbullying and relational bullying (Waasdorp and Bradshaw, 2015).

Through young people's accounts, it became apparent that they were self-aware of their emotions and were able to identify actions they could take to make themselves feel better and prevent further distress. The young people's resourcefulness was unanticipated, but consistent across many interviews with young people. There has been much research examining individual characteristics of the young people including demographics (Bucchianeri et al, 2016; Toomey and Russell, 2016), wellbeing and psychometric traits (Cook et al, 2010; Kljakovic and Hunt, 2016), however it is also important to understand the way in which young people personally respond to the experience of bullying. young people's resourcefulness was evidenced through their own decisions to engage in activities which distract from the experience of bullying. Behaviours which focus on practical solutions resonate with productive strategies described in the coping literature more broadly (Garcia, 2010), and in relation to bullying specifically (Paul et al, 2012).

A systematic review by Nocentini et al (2019) concluded that family relationships characterised by warmth, affection, open communication, and support were associated with lower levels of bullying victimisation. In the UK, Bowes et al (2010) identified maternal warmth as a buffer against the negative effects of bullying. Similarly, this research extends such findings in the context of relational bullying specifically. The family was identified as helping young people to successfully navigate it and ameliorate the negative effects associated with it. A wealth of research (Gutman et al, 2010; Levin et al, 2012; Klemera et al, 2017) has demonstrated that family support (often parental) is associated with young people's wellbeing and development, particularly in stressful events (Pössel et al, 2018). The young people in the interviews described family support in the context of being victimised. If the family unit is to offer support that is specific to the experience of relational bullying, it needs to be aware of the situation. However, research shows that many young people do not inform their parents, with only a third of young people in a Finnish sample telling an adult at home (Blomqvist et al, 2020); as such many young people may not benefit from the positive effects of family support that is specific to victimisation.

While friendships play a pivotal developmental role during adolescence, they are unstable in nature (Poulin and Chan, 2010). Relational bullying is often linked to friendships, as demonstrated by the young people's

personal experiences. Understanding the role of friends in relational bullying may be particularly nuanced and complex. Friendships may be a useful resource and play a role in helping a young people positively cope with these types of bullying behaviour; however, the individual person within that role may change over time and the fluid nature of friendships may facilitate relational bullying behaviours.

Relational bullying warrants as much attention as other forms of bullying in anti-bullying policies and interventions; Smith et al (2012) established that the majority (78.3%) of school policies they examined referenced relational bullying, although it did not feature as often as physical or verbal bullying. The interviews with young people highlighted an overall sense of dissatisfaction about how relational bullying was dealt with, but there was an acknowledgement that school staff members were well placed to help with bullying behaviours. While teachers can offer support, their own attitudes toward bullying have been shown to influence the help-seeking behaviours of young people (Cortes and Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2014; Blomqvist et al, 2020). Other professionals in the school environment, in particular nurses, also have a key role to play as they are in a position that enables the building of close relationships with young people (Borup and Holstein, 2007; Cooper et al, 2012); they also have appropriate underpinning knowledge of bullying (Pigozi and Bartoli, 2016). The ethos of a whole-school approach has potentially much to offer and has been advocated by others, such as the 'Olweus Bullying Prevention Programme' (Olweus, 2004), and the 'KiVa anti-bullying programme' (Kärnä et al, 2011).

Strengths and limitations

The sample size for this study was small, and the findings may not reflect the views of other young people. In addition, data collected via other strategies (such as focus groups) may have yielded different conclusions. Qualitative research can be associated with subjectivity; therefore, transparency of the methodological and theoretical choices throughout the research process are key to ensure others 'can understand how and why decisions were made' (Nowell et al, 2017: 3). To enhance trustworthiness, a clear audit trail was documented throughout the study. While qualitative research does not seek to make generalisations, the inclusion of participants' demographic details may facilitate transferability to other similar situations.

Conclusions

Over the last two decades there has been a strong focus on bullying, with Volk et al (2017) noting over 5 000 peer-reviewed articles were published in a 6-year period. This growing interest in bullying is understandable, the UK has made concerted efforts to reduce bullying among young people including the implementation of national legislation (such as the Education and Inspections Act

2006), publication of government guidance documents (DfE, 2017; 2018), support of charitable organisations (including the Anti-Bullying Alliance [2023] and Ditch the Label [2023]) and an annual national awareness week. Despite efforts to reduce bullying, relational bullying behaviours have not had the national recognition that they deserve, with this form of bullying often being positioned as a normative social behaviour among girls (Simmons, 2011). The normalisation of relational bullying may be detrimental to its detection and intervention, which could have implications for young people's health and wellbeing. This research recognised factors that may help young people to successfully navigate relational bullying, thus mitigating the negative effects of this form of victimisation. Anti-bullying initiatives that encompass relational bullying behaviours are likely to have a substantive impact in terms of improving young people's health, wellbeing and, therefore, their future life chances. **CHHE**

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